Nicolas Freeling

CRIMINAL CONVERSATION

BLOOMSBURY READER

Criminal Conversation

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Part One

One

Van der Valk was tired and a little irritable. There seemed to have been, lately, at Central Recherche – the criminal investigations department in the city of Amsterdam – an unusual number of silly happenings. Time-wasting, fruitless, inconsequent. He could at least congratulate himself that they did not get fiscal frauds, which got sent to a special little squad headed by a chief inspector with an economics degree. The Economical gentlemen' Commissaris Samson, the departmental chief, called them; he didn't like them either. Technically, Chief Inspector Kan and Inspector Scholten were both senior to van der Valk, but secretly Mr Samson got on best with van der Valk because he wasn't a gentleman either.

They had all been pestered by an upheaval in what the papers persist in calling the underworld. The public adores reading about the underworld, which is so colourful, especially when the reporters put in the colourful nicknames: if there aren't any they make them up. The police prefer things to be less colourful.

Rita the Eyebrows, so called because she shaved hers off, had come in and denounced, for reasons of her own, a well-known 'figure of the underworld' as the man who had assaulted the Greek. It was all the Greek's fault really; why had the blasted fellow been tedious enough to die of his injuries? Now, with an absolutely cut-and-dried formal accusation, they had to arrest Cross-eyed Janus. They confronted him with Rita, who promptly retracted everything. She explained that Kurt the Smouse, Janus' great pal, would do her up if it was known that she had shopped a Comrade. It was explained patiently back *a*) that the lawyers disliked anonymous denunciations, and *b*) that Kurt was serving a two-year stretch, recently acquired for armed-assault-resulting-in-grave-bodily-harm. Subsidiary, as the lawyers say, possession-of-illegally-acquired-firearms. One incurrence incurs another, said the Officer of Justice wittily.

After much tactful reasoning, Rita had been encouraged to build it all up again. Contrary to the sentimental imaginings of the public, prostitutes are not desperately unhappy, nor do they in the least grudge giving eighty per cent of their earnings to a protector. Rita had simply not forgiven Janus for telling everybody that it wasn't only her eyebrows that were shaved.

She'd repeated her story in front of the judge of instruction. Papers had gone to the prosecutor, a case had been prepared, Janus – grinning in his inimitable cross-eyed way – had been produced. And the bitch had gone right back on the whole lot in court, and Janus

had had to be freed, for lack of full-and-convincing-establishment of the painstakingly prepared indictment.

"And the next person who comes in here with a denunciation of anybody," shouted a greatly annoyed van der Valk, "I'll have pegged for indecent exposure." He was not pleased when in the next morning's mail a letter was found accusing Doctor Hubert van der Post of doing away with a certain Cabestan: an alcoholic elderly painter who had recently been found dead in his flat; cause of death, admittedly, seeming a bit vague.

And Chief Inspector Kan was on leave again – sick leave too. With piles; adding insult to injury, that. Van der Valk liked Kan well enough, for he was a dry stick but a conscientious, loyal person, but he suspected him of making altogether too good a thing out of this. He read the letter twice and dragged unwillingly in to Mr Samson.

Mr Samson was working; something of a rarity. He had sworn to get Cross-eyed Janus even if it gave him piles, too. For in the last two years the only thing they had ever really got pinned on the horrible fellow was three months – a flea-bite, since he had been sitting for two and a half of them in 'antenatal clinic' – for altering an auto number-plate with intent to defraud. The heat got so insistent that a lucrative business as importer of unroadworthy German motor-cars (religiously paying excise duties on scrap metal) had dried up. Mr Samson was searching for swingeing five-year indictments in his lawbook; van der Valk put the letter on the desk without comment. The commissaire came swimming up from his vengeful train of thought, pushed his glasses back up his nose, and moved his eyes enough to reach the corner of the desk. He didn't react as van der Valk had hoped he would, with the stubby finger pointing at the waste-paper basket.

"What are you doing right now?"

"Very very busy," hopefully.

"What with?"

"A geezer let his auto fall in the canal. When the fire crane got it out they found six thousand pornographic magazines in the luggage compartment."

"You don't call that being busy."

"You mean take this fellow up on his suggestion? You mean it?"

"Why not?"

"We'll only look fools."

"We do anyway," said Mr Samson disagreeably.

There just wasn't anything van der Valk could do to get out of it. It was Kan's work really. Damn Kan. Get canned, Kan, if you can, Kan.

Back in his office he read the letter again. It was a decidedly queer letter.

> 'Dear Sir,
> I have no doubt that you attach little weight to anonymous denunciations. I would be ready to abandon anonymity if I can receive certain assurances. I will make these known, together with the conclusions I have reached regarding the death of a certain Cabestan, to a responsible police officer. If the department has no interest, I will trouble it no further. If on the other hand the police are interested to hear that the author of this death is certainly Dr Hubert van der Post, a responsible officer can meet me on the steps of the Arustel Hotel at ten fifteen in the morning precisely on the day this letter is received. He can identify himself by letting fall a copy of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.'*

Van der Valk looked at his watch. It was nine fifteen. He toyed with the idea of having this ingenious gentleman picked up and shadowed to his home or place of business, so that his identity could be studied at leisure. Then he grinned. Talking about 'the department' in that toffee-nosed way…an anonymous letter in a discursive, elaborate self-important style that was rare. Faintly interested, van der Valk decided to do the job himself. The pornographic magazines were not all that amusing.

He had ten minutes to wait, which he spent reading the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* his interest growing fainter. But at ten fifteen exactly an elderly thin man of distinguished appearance left the hotel abruptly, paused on the step and looked sharply about. He dropped his newspaper on the step obediently, hoping that somebody would give him a microfilm of the cornflakes the Supreme Commander of Nato had had for breakfast. The man walked straight up to him and said, "I have a taxi waiting," in a frosty patrician voice.

Van der Valk picked up his newspaper, trotted along, and got in meekly.

"Javakade." A decided tone; the taxi got into gear in a leisurely way. The man did not speak; he spent his time looking out of the rear window. Van der Valk looked at him. Long bony face, greyish coloured. Expensive grey suit. Correct flat silver hair. Eyes, nose and mouth accustomed to oversee, preside over, and if need be dominate the Annual General Meeting. A man narrow perhaps, obstinate, opinionated, but with decision and intelligence.

He had been wondering what on earth was to be found at the Javakade, a long, deserted-looking wharf in the docks where the East Indian trade had flourished in the days of Holland's empire. Suddenly he tumbled to it; not bad. To reach the docks, an auto travelling from central Amsterdam has to cross a whole puzzle of waterways and inlets, over swing or bascule bridges, where traffic is slow and reduced to a single-line trickle. It is a simple matter to see whether any other auto on the road has business on the Javakade, where the dock forms a dead end.

"That'll do here, driver. Wait for me five minutes." They got out, walked around a corner, and stood on the wharf.

"Who are you?" asked the patrician voice.

"My name is van der Valk; it so happened that I opened the mail this morning. This card identifies me."

A sharp look. "I suppose I can at least be grateful that you haven't tried to have me followed. Are you ready to listen to me? To treat what I have to say in confidence at least until I have made myself clear? Very well. If you agree, we will go back into the town."

The taxi started again abruptly; if the driver was curious he wasn't trying hard. They drove back as far as the station, where the grey man got out, paid the taxi, and without looking at van der Valk walked calmly, neither slow nor fast, over the bridge, where a row of autos stood parked along the water. He unlocked a prudish black Rover and motioned the policeman in. There was a good smell of blond leather. The sun slid out from behind a cloud, looked at Amsterdam without any great enthusiasm, and slid back in again.

"That all seemed rather childish to me," said van der Valk, indifferently. "Waste of a good taxi, I call it. The driver would recognise you, if called upon."

"That does not interest me," levelly. "I wished to see whether you would have me followed, which would have shown a police mentality, which I would have found a kind of bad faith. If you had wished, without listening to me, to know who I was and all about me, I should have refused to speak to you. Sharing my taxi has no legal meaning whatever."

"These legal tricks bore me. You ask me to keep an appointment; I keep it. Of course I want to know who you are and why you write me a peculiar letter; otherwise I would not be here. It would have been quite normal if I had detailed a man to follow you. Since you ask for my interest, why be surprised at my taking an interest? Why pretend that you didn't write the letter? If you won't go further with the accusations you hint at being able to support, why write it at all?

Why waste my time and yours?"

The grey man gave a very thin smile indeed.

"I am a businessman, Mr van der Valk. I am proud of the fact that in all my career I have never done anything unethical, or even questionable. It has, however, frequently been my experience to meet unethical persons, even to do business with them. I am a cautious person; perhaps that is why I am successful. Both the letter and the taxi were a kind of test. I was prepared at any time to break off my overtures. I still am."

"I will listen to what you say. I will receive it in confidence until I know exactly what is being asked of me. I will then give you an honest opinion. Is that what you want?"

"Yes, Mr van der Valk. I do not impute a lack of ethics to you, but this is, if I may call it so, a case of conscience. What do you do when you know that a person is a criminal, when you have, even, absolute certainty, but when you lack effective proof?"

Sadly, van der Valk thought about Cross-eyed Janus. This was what you might call a slightly different milieu, but the results seemed to be the same.

"We use patience. Proof is a thing that may be furnished in unlikely ways."

"Just so. I have no proof of whatever I can allege."

"But you have certainty, if I have understood you?"

"You may judge of that. I will not lay myself open to any charge of malicious falsehood. My word has never been questioned; it is not going to be now. You may act or not, as you think fit, on what I have to say, but I will make no formal accusation, I will not have my name brought forward. If proof is supplied, it is for you to supply it. Are you so surprised that I should have scruples, that I should hesitate to give my name, before being satisfied that a man of responsibility and intelligence was prepared to respect my words? Do you think that a man like me is going to walk up the steps of a police bureau, give his card to the first man he sees in a uniform, and blurt out a damaging tale, that carries weight simply because it comes from a man accustomed to weigh his words, to the first nonentity with sufficient years' service to give him a seat behind a desk? I wrote my anonymous letter deliberately, doubtful whether you would react at all. Since you have, it encourages me to believe I may be able to go a step further, but it is not too late, Mr van der Valk, to remain strangers to one another."

Van der Valk, impassive during all this, took out a cigarette, lit it, turned a little towards the man next to him, and leaned his elbow on

the leather back-rest.

"You are a tortuous person. You wish to make an accusation, but wish not to be responsible for making it. So you think up all this, wishing and hoping, I have no doubt, to excite my curiosity and thereby secure my interest. That was, I think, the real purpose of this taxi game. Very well, I can understand that. You are not happy because you think your accusation may have no value, even that I might think you activated by malice. Let's cut this through. If I think there is nothing in what you may think or know, I will forget this conversation. I will not even try to pierce your identity. If I think action is needed, I will take the responsibility of acting, and your name will not be disclosed till proof is found – if it is found. Will that satisfy you of my good faith?"

"Yes. You are obviously an intelligent person."

"If you had chosen, you could have told me all that you knew in a letter, and still remained anonymous. Leaving me the decision whether to act or no."

"The tale involves members of my family. But aside from that incidental fact, this is a grave allegation. If I make it, I make it in person. I am not a street-corner informer." Where, wondered van der Valk, does pomposity become dignity?

"You know," he said heavily, "you are asking a great deal of me."

"That is true. You will also see that I am asking a lot of myself. It would have been a great deal more in my interest to have kept silence. That silence would, however, have been guilty. I would have become a conniver."

"I think the time has come when I should know your name."

Curious, he was thinking – even comic. A bond exists between this very stiff, very rich, very careful character and Shaved Rita.

"My name is Carl Merckel. I am a merchant banker. I am the managing director of the firm of Lutz Brothers."

This short sentence irritated van der Valk very much indeed. He realised instantly that he was on treacherous ground. This man was one of the half-dozen most important men in Holland; fingers in all the important affairs, financing numerous state projects, with a whole portfolio of twopenny ministers and threeha'penny state secretaries in his left trouser pocket. He could, if he had wished, have put the whole police apparatus in motion without his name ever appearing at all. He had not done so. Van der Valk respected this man, but that did not check his irritation. A man who, last night, at the Amstel Hotel, had sat at table at a formal dinner with the Minister of Justice, a Royal Highness, two directors of the Netherlands Trading Company,

and the burgomaster of Amsterdam…

"I know your name," he said. "I know your friends. Why did you not go to them with your story?"

Mr Merckel disregarded this without moving his face. Cold eyes bored into the highly polished wood that panelled his dashboard.

"I am talking to you in a parked auto," he said curtly. "I have not asked you to come to my house nor to my office, and I should be grateful if you will not at any time come to see me at either. I will give you a telephone number. Now: to the point."

Van der Valk lit another cigarette and leaned back. Inside the range of his eye and ear trams clanked and autos tooted, bicycles clattered and people chattered – the New Side Voorburgwal, one of Amsterdam's dreariest, dustiest streets. It is devoted to newspaper offices and advertising agencies, second-hand bookshops that look seedy and cafés that seem always to be empty. All the doors seemed covered with dust and peeling paint; the pavement was littered with dustbins that still had not been taken in, and the access to the public lavatory was completely blocked by bicycles in varying stages of decay. Locked in a smell of expensive leather and fine machinery, he felt a strong sense of unreality.

"A man came to see me not long ago, whom I once knew slightly because many years ago, at a time when he was a fashionable painter, I had commissioned him to do a portrait of my first wife. This man was called or called himself Casimir Cabestan. He wished, he said, to paint my second wife, who is a very good-looking woman. I refused. He then came out with a most confused tale, full of vague hints and veiled threats, which I judged to be an effort at blackmail. I spoke to him sharply."

Ah, thought van der Valk; I can well believe it.

"He claimed that my wife was conducting an affair of pleasure with a doctor she has consulted, that he had found this out, how he did not say, and that he deserved, he seemed to think, a reward for telling me. I told him that I would not hesitate to sue him: I should judge that I frightened him sufficiently."

His eyes, for the first time, turned towards van der Valk with something more behind them. A shade of warmth coloured his voice when he again began speaking.

"I am very fond indeed of my wife. If I looked into this scrap of malice any further it was to ensure that I would be able to protect her from the consequences of any indiscreet word or impulse. The man Cabestan, I found, lived in a sort of apartment under the eaves of a house occupied by a doctor that my wife has indeed consulted. I have

consulted him myself. He is an excellent doctor, skilful and sensitive. He is, I believe, well known in his profession as unorthodox, possibly, in his methods, but as a man who cures his patients. I had, in short, no reason whatever to wish him ill or to suspect him of ill. I concluded that the whole tale was a piece of malicious invention. For I had enquiries made about this Cabestan. He has lost his reputation – had, I should say. He drank too much, was reduced to all sorts of shifts to make ends meet. Then - I learned it accidentally while glancing at the newspaper; it was the usual three-line item in a column of fatal accidents – the man had died suddenly, the cause of death, seemingly, a trifle obscure. It attracted my attention. I have not much experience of blackmailers" – the words were spoken quite without irony – "but it did engage my thought that if such a one had a stronger hold than that which this man had upon me, and if he tried to exert pressure upon a person with a certain public life, as I have, he would then run a risk of an attack. Your experience will know how much weight to give to this point. I come to the kernel of my tale.

"Only a day or two after this death, my wife went to see this doctor. She made no secret of it - I asked her indifferently where she was going and she answered freely that she had been told to go for a check-up. It was a small point but it was the second small coincidence to catch my attention and for the first time I took the whole matter seriously. I am not going to tell you how I came to feel certain of the truth but I will tell you this. There are things that one may have cause to tell a doctor, particularly a neurologist. I will leave it at this. My wife is a young, healthy woman with a considerable need for an emotional life. I do not, in fact, give her enough interest or amusement in life. The story has truth. With reluctance I have come to believe that this odious Cabestan had in some way guessed at a fact.

"I do not believe that there is any passion involved, although I am not, perhaps, a very good judge. Under the influence of passion I can understand that a man might do things he would not ordinarily do. Cabestan, however, was not assaulted, or struck, as I understand. You may, of course, disregard my beliefs, which are not evidential, but I am certain that the man was murdered, in some manner that a doctor might choose, in order to keep the association with my wife from reaching any ears.

"If that is so, you might ask why I should intervene, since it is obviously in my interest to keep silent. It has not been easy. I choose to disregard my wife's actions – I do not believe her guilty of any complicity in this death. I realise what the consequences will be if

any such complicity should be discovered. I have still found myself forced to speak. In the position I occupy, in the function that I fill, with its many bearings on public life – you realise that I am frequently called upon to give decisions regarding municipal and even state projects – I have sometimes had to decide whether or not I might be contributing to dishonesty, even corruption. I have sometimes closed my eyes and remained certain that I was bringing a benefit to people who needed it even if some rogues enriched themselves along the way. A banker, Mr van der Valk, cannot be subject to minute scrupulosities of this nature. He cannot, by the same law and in the same breath, give way to a dishonest silence regarding a crime. As an officer of law under oath, you will understand that. I might add that a doctor has also a professional oath."

"It is not, in fact, exactly going to be easy for any one of the three of us," said van der Valk abruptly. Suddenly, he could not stand all this another minute: he opened the auto door and fell thankfully out into fresh air. "You have to understand, Mr Merckel, that you have given this matter long thought, as you tell me," he added more calmly. "Before I can tell what can or will be done in the light of all this, I have to do some serious thinking myself. Just tell me where I can get into touch with you."

He stood vaguely in the middle of the pavement with tourists bumping into him, staring vacantly up the New Side Voorburgwal. He gave a loud sigh, as though he had been very thirsty and had drunk a whole glass of cold beer up in one breath, and a slovenly woman dragging in her dustbin stared at him, recognised him, and gave a squawking cackle of laughter.

"Whatsamatter, Smiler – in love?"

He hadn't even the heart to look at her.

"Stuck up, these days," she remarked, slamming the door after herself and her dustbin, indignantly.

Two

The morning, and most of the afternoon, since really the disposal of the pornographic-magazines man was child's play, he spent finding out all he could about the death of one Cabestan, together with any information he could pick up about Mr Carl Merckel, managing director of Lutz Brothers, merchant bankers, and Dr Hubert van der Post, neurologist, specialist in short-wave and other electrical treatments. There wasn't much. The doctor – a young GP who often did police work in the precinct but was not an official police surgeon – had signed a death certificate indicating heart failure as cause of death, and had scribbled in a few pointers that had struck him as obviously explanatory. Cabestan was a chronic drinker if not actually alcoholic in the clinical sense, had suffered from bronchial trouble, and had lived in a flat up three steep long flights of stairs. No lift, and anything heavy, like a Butane gas cylinder, had to be carried up those three flights. A sudden exertion, suggested the doctor on the telephone, a shortage of breath, a circulatory and respiratory system weakened by abusive use of alcohol…nobody had dreamed of questioning this death. He had been found dressed, on the floor, a good thirty-six hours after death, by some acquaintance who had wondered why he was nowhere to be seen, had been bothered at getting no answer to the door, and had finally warned the landlord – Dr van der Post, who lived in the house…

No, not the doctor, who had been busy with patients. The secretary, said a brief police report, had found a spare key kept in case of fire – for the attic flat had a totally separate street door – and had given it to the policeman, stating that the two households had had nothing to do with each other, that she barely knew Cabestan, who had been the tenant since the time of the last owner, and that he was an untroublesome person who paid his rent regularly. Dr Post, seen briefly at lunchtime, had been courteous and concerned, confirmed that he hardly knew his tenant, and suggested calling the bank that paid the rent.

Bank too had little to say. Had handled Cabestan for thirty years. He had made a fortune in his day, but had for ten years now been going through lean times. Yes, they had received odd irregular payments; they always had: it was normal for an artist to earn his living in irregular lump sums. There was very little in the account at the time of death. Executor was a younger brother in the provinces, a small-town builder-contractor, who had seen nothing of his brother in twenty years: neither their paths nor their interests had ever

coincided. Quite.

No breath of scandal had ever touched either banker or doctor. Plenty was known about the public lives of both; little about the private lives of either. Doctor married, first marriage on both sides, childless. Degree from Amsterdam, another from Edinburgh, various post-graduate studies and papers, but member of no particular learned societies, nor did he hold any defined consultant or hospital posts. Purely private practice, slightly unorthodox in methods, extensive connection with society patients, regarded as very skilful and able.

Banker married and likewise childless; second marriage on both sides – first wife Jewess, died in Canada in exile during war years. Remarried to attractive and elegant young widow of editor – lively provincial daily paper; shot by Germans as resistance worker in '44. Widow left with one daughter at age of twenty-two. Remarried at thirty when working as secretary to banking colleague. Never been the slightest sign of malaise in this marriage.

Van der Valk, liking it all less and less, was unpleasant the whole afternoon to everyone he met, and was even rude about the supper he got that evening from his wife, for no reason at all; it was spaghetti, which he always enjoyed, too.

The clouds had broken up and vanished; the weather forecast was a prolonged period of settled summer weather, warm and clear. A perfect evening. Arlette looked at her husband and decided resignedly that it was no use expecting any help with the dishes. The two boys, who had been outside since coming home from school, tried to sneak out again, and she had a struggle getting them to go to their room instead to do their homework. A summer evening is no great joy to children at the lyceum – never does the homework sit on the stomach with a more leaden weight.

Ordinarily, van der Valk would have simply told them sharply to stop their nonsense, but now he disregarded the squabble altogether. He had passed into his trance. He pushed two pot-plants to one side, sat on the window-sill, lit a cigar, and stared heavily at the traffic below. He thought best while leaning out of windows gazing at autos, bicycles, pedestrians; it was as though only in this detached yet close contact with people did his thoughts reach the widest.

He stared at a pretty little German auto, brand new, painted an obnoxious colour. He considered the colour carefully. It is that, he decided, of cheap tinned tomato soup, only found in the nastiest restaurants and the laziest homes. It is a small auto, he thought, produced in huge numbers, in a limited range of colours; ergo, the

Germans have no sense of colour. Otherwise they would not sell these things in what are evidently great numbers. He was disgusted when by one of those coincidences that are a corrective to pride and faulty deduction a larger, much more expensive auto of a renowned French make came sailing down the street a moment later – painted the identical nauseating shade.

There were two main problems; he had to find a tactic to match both. First, no policeman in his senses would take this wasps' nest seriously. Officially, there were too many toes to trip over, and such sensitive toes… Not the remotest chance of ever finding out the truth. Bound up with this was problem two. No policeman in his senses would launch himself into an investigation where Herr Merckel held him in leading strings. Lay off my wife and family; lay off me. Otherwise – just remember, will you, who my friends are! It wasn't that the man was dishonest. But his mentality was so tortuous that he could ask – he had asked – for an investigation into an affair he suspected was criminal, since his delicate moral nostrils were offended by it. He could say, nobly, that his wife's possible involvement made no difference to his conscience. But if that investigation started pressing on his private life – woe to the investigator. To this mentality, the two states of mind were quite compatible. Morality was maintained.

Even if van der Valk pushed through into an official enquiry, even if Mr Samson authorised it – which of course he wouldn't - one tiny false step and it would be his, van der Valk's, neck. It couldn't be otherwise, with both banker and doctor ready with the hatchet.

Was there any way out? Suppose, just suppose…that he never made any official enquiry at all, that he operated entirely alone, not only with no official help, cognisance or support but in direct contradiction to all police regulations. Van der Valk in the romantic, intoxicating, ridiculous role of private eye. Philip van der Marlowe.

A highly ludicrous notion, attributable to his over-ready imagination which many superior officers had frequently told him was his worst enemy. But tempting, considered purely as a tactic. He would have to behave, if he was going to find anything out, in an unethical way; Samson mustn't know – anyway not till later. Because if he found his subordinate doing anything unethical he would crucify the clown.

Merckel couldn't make a complaint, because a complaint could only apply to an official action. Merckel had wanted to stay anonymous – very well, van der Valk would simply deny that he had ever heard of Merckel, and the complaint would boil down to lack of

action taken on an anonymous letter that was in itself unjustifiable. Merckel, having himself made no official approach, could make no official complaint.

Van der Valk found himself testing his theory in an imaginary conversation with Mr Samson.

"Damned complicated cock and bull story."

"You can say that again." Van der Valk, playing his little part.

"Now why does this banker come secretly to us in this extraordinary way, when if he's not satisfied he has only to call one of his pals and ask for his name to be kept out of it?"

"Maybe he has guilt feelings."

"Maybe he did it himself and wonders whether we have any queries. He was being blackmailed. He's no evidence that the doctor was. His tale is rummy. He explains his certitude that his wife was playing games with the doctor – but not his certitude that the doctor killed this Cabestan – what a name!"

"But if Cabestan had anything on the wife he had it on the doctor too. He would put the screw on both together."

"Suppose his evidence of misbehaviour – what a phrase! – was not conclusive – Cabestan's, I mean. He thinks a doctor likelier to hit back, to make an accusation of slander. He concentrates on the woman, thinking her husband is in a position where he would be extremely averse to that kind of publicity. She tells her husband, knowing he is not jealous. Husband knocks off this Cabestan, then gets scared a post-mortem would show up violence. Tells us, making accusations of the doctor, hinting at things he guesses we'll find out anyway. Hm?"

"Medical was superficial; didn't show a damn thing. Fellow was in poor health; heart failure quite likely and natural. I turned it up this morning."

"I'm not applying for any goddam exhumation orders on this gossip. You've looked up this doctor?"

"Well known. Nothing whatever shady. Society practice. Neurologist. Good at curing sleeping-pill addiction – that kind of thing. Nothing fishy at all; properly qualified and everything."

"I see. You told this Merckel, I hope, that we were not bound to take any action at all on that kind of tale, whoever he is and whoever his friends are?"

"Of course. Odd thing – he knows this doctor himself – got cured of some obscure trouble. He genuinely believes in a murder – has no real malice against the doctor at all."

"We can't take any official action. Much too tricky a set-up.

Perhaps – just barely possible – you might try unofficially to find out more about this doctor. But the breath of a complaint and I disown you. Get it?"

"I get it."

"This Merckel, quite plainly, has not told all he knows."

"Exactly the impression I got."

"You just might shake something loose – even with no official standing whatever. You're supposed to have some brains somewhere, aren't you?"

This imaginary conversation was, van der Valk thought, quite impossible. Samson, once he knew the situation, would order van der Valk or anybody else categorically to lay off. But there was one thing it was important to know about the old man. He could and did close his eyes to all sorts of irregularities and enormities provided he knew nothing about them officially. Out of his long experience, he knew that the ever increasing mass of regulations and the bristling juridical doubletalk strangled all initiative, and reduced a cautious police officer too often to impotence. He knew that his subordinates, to get results, were often forced to break rules. In order to avoid issuing official ukase, he wished never to be officially told. If any complaint arrived, he would stand up for his squad, stubbornly, effectively.

Kan, now, went always by the book. Rigidly, scrupulously, and insisting on knowing everything. But Kan was away. And the old boy didn't care what you did as long as you got results. You were on your own. Win and he gave you full credit. But if you lost – getting caught doing something not just outside the borderline of the rules, but downright unethical – he would, unhesitatingly, throw you to the wolves.

A hell of a gamble, this.

Van der Valk liked his tactical notion, though. He could go and have a crack at this doctor. Get in pretending to be a patient, perhaps. The man would be – assuming that there was anything he was guilty of at all – badly shaken at the appearance of what could only be police, or another blackmailer – just as he had got rid of the first. And if he wasn't guilty of anything at all? Well then, one would need to withdraw very skilfully indeed, because one was in a bad fix.

But he felt, strongly, that there was something about this doctor that would dislike the notion of daylight. There had been something about Heer Merckel, too, that had been oddly convincing.

Three

A successful, fashionable doctor, thought van der Valk vaguely, is really likeliest to be a rigid, arid person. Living in an expensive featureless house surrounded by his precious 'standing'. But this one was at the very first glance more interesting, showing, even on the extreme outside, marks of personality.

Take his house, now. An old-fashioned house in a street that was no longer fashionable – heavy houses in an ugly style from the epoch of the Kaiser's heyday around 1910, perhaps. But ugliness was redeemed from the start by the trees in front, lindens in full foliage, allowed to reach their full proportions – a rarity in Amsterdam as in all Dutch towns, where the municipality's tidiness neurosis becomes, faced with anything as messy and unhygienic as a tree, very nearly psychotic. The explanation seemed to be that the pavement here was, for Amsterdam, unusually wide, and even for Amsterdam unusually dusty.

The neighbourhood seemed dingy for a fashionable doctor, and the doctors that remained between import-export agencies, South American consulates and sales offices for German factories had a faintly obscurantist sound, judging by the brass plates. Gerontologist, otolaryngo…damn it, he thought, why not just say ear-nose-'n-throat. The large, simple, well-polished brass plate that said 'H. v.d. Post, neurologist. By appointment only', was matched by another that said, politely, 'Please note that this entrance is for patients ONLY. ALL other callers or enquiries at Wozzeckstr. 14.'

So. A mews entrance; that was interesting.

The curtains looked rich and velvety; the house was carefully painted. What was slightly odd about it? Of course – the extra street door at the corner, added with no regard for the architectural balance; not that that was any great shakes. That was where this Cabestan had lived, up in the attic.

Well – now or never. If he was a policeman, he had been instructed to go round to the back with his hat in his hand. If he was a patient, he might very probably be out of a job next week. Van der Marlowe crossed his palm with silver, looked about hopefully for a black cat, and walked up the short gravel path. The doctor's door was a heavy old affair with carved panels; ordinarily these doors open but this resisted efforts to turn the handle. He rang, and a voice answered at once on a speakbox concealed behind a rococo wrought-iron grille. Quiet voice of a middle-aged woman.

"May I know who you are, please?"

“My name is van der Valk, but you don’t know me.”

“You wish to consult the doctor?”

“Yes.” What else could one say to an intercom?

“Would you be so good as to come straight up the stairs you will see in the hallway and into the room marked ‘Secretary’?”

“Thank you.” The door buzzed and clicked. A neat notice at eye level said, ‘Please close it behind you’. Hat-rack; he hung his hat; could always come back later to hang himself. Hall furniture, fairly sumptuous, colourless. Stairs, doors on a landing. At the end a curtained portière; living quarters. He walked obediently into ‘Secretary’, which was a small neat office, bright with clear colours and flowers. A thin, light woman, with blued hair, rimless octagonal glasses and an unassuming green woolly frock sat at the desk.

“Mr van der Valk? I am Miss Maas. Do please sit down. What time of day do you prefer for an appointment?”

“I would very much like to see the doctor today if at all possible.”

She smiled professionally. “That is usually very difficult but as it happens I do have a cancellation this morning. But I will have to ask you to wait half an hour – would you prefer to come back? Will that suit?”

“Perfectly.”

Her smile approved of him beamingly for not being difficult. “Just give your name at the speaker.”

He had time for a leisurely stroll into the Wozzeckstraat. It was an alleyway sandwiched between two rows of patrician houses that had gardens; there were high walls, garages, sheds where obscure little businesses were carried on, an ‘interior decorator’, a metal smith, a hand weaver, a window-cleaner, plebeian amidst this art but certainly with four times the income. The back of the doctor’s house was a garage with a flat above it – chauffeur, doubtless, possibly doubling as gardener, and wife as concierge, for there was another brass plate. ‘For all messages, goods delivered, offers or collections. H. v. d. Post.’ In the alley stood a cherry-red Alfa Romeo town car with the entwined snake at the windscreen corner. Again – rather an individual auto for a doctor. Still… He walked on as far as the water, where he stood gazing, rattling small change in his trouser pocket.

When he got back the secretary had a sort of orange form. He gave his own home address, his profession as Business Man.

“Have you been recommended to come here by any other doctor? You just came on your own – I see,” brightly still. “And have you a state insurance number, or is yours private? Thank you so much. I’ll be calling you within five minutes, probably.”

Well, there he was, a patient, and he hadn't been told to go to the back door. Would the doctor send a bill for professional services in to the police department? Ha. He felt buoyant, a thing that made him feel lucky. He was confident, now that he was in, that he wouldn't get flung out on his ear. The intercom clicked above his head and the bright soft voice addressed him.

"Mr van der Valk, would you be so kind as to take the door on your left at the bottom of the stairs? Dr van der Post is ready for you."

The organisation here is pretty good, he thought on his way down: they don't have a heap of people sitting staring at each other – and that fact, no doubt, is reflected in the bills patients get presented with.

Four

He had no time to absorb the surroundings straight away, that first visit. It was later that he discovered afresh innumerable details of the figure, its background, its frame, and began to fit them in, for they were all broken up and jumbled by the jigsaw – the strain induced and the boldness needed. Carrying through with this confidence trick, this quite brazen piece of imposture, had not been at all easy. When he left the house he was stunned with nervous fatigue and with a confused heap of unco-ordinated impressions. He stood blinking at the traffic flowing at the main road, a hundred metres down from the house with the lindens. He did not quite know what to do; it was latish for going back to an office where there was, he hoped, nothing for him to do but catch up on some neglected paperwork, and it was too early to go home. That atmosphere, besides the smell of dinner cooking, of his house, of his wife's skin when he kissed her, the whole feeling of home – no no, that would all destroy the very picture he was trying to paint, the colouring he was trying to pin down. He needed something to do, something small and unimportant, that would be symbolic of what, to him, promised to become a particularly delicate and risky piece of work.

He walked with heavy steps into a stationer's, where he bought three cardboard folders. A little further on was a café, where he sat down deliberately to examine his purchase: not feeling at all alcoholic he ordered a blackcurrant juice. There was a green folder, a sort of insipid nile-green, and a beige one; he shoved these at the back of his briefcase. A grey one seemed to him the most suitable. He fished for a ballpoint and lettered it in neat capitals. C M P. Cabestan-Merckel-Post. Canadian Mineral Prospectors. Consolidated Madagascan Potash.

There was certainly a connection. That this doctor had killed Cabestan was not impossible. That he played games with the more sympathetic of his women patients was, perhaps, even probable. Because, thought van der Valk, meditating over his blackcurrant juice and his scribbling pad, Dr Post knew, he rather thought, why he had come, even if he had not known himself. Oh yes, he could fly balloons about the coincidental death of a seedy painter who had happened to live in the attics up above, but there was not proof enough to condemn a cockroach on, and Post knew that. Did he know that just because he was a doctor, with the professional knowledge of a man who has at some time taken a course in forensic medicine, or was it the cynicism of a man laughing at the amazing

naïveté and stupidity of the police? Van der Valk didn't know. That attitude of amused indifference…

Had he gone about this the right way? But once in a false position – in a situation where any position would be false – it was hard to see how else he could have done it. He could have retreated promptly into his official identity and said the words out of the book, upon which the doctor – any doctor, knowing a little about the world – would have challenged them. There was no evidence of any weight at all, and the impudent bluff would have been called.

Van der Valk had followed, perhaps, that instinct that made him a dangerous policeman, and sometimes so frightened his superiors: his instinct for fitting his approach towards a problem to the nature of that problem. In a false position a false game. He had pretended, for a moment, to be a patient, and had then embarked on a transparent fiction that these suspicions were really delusions to be discussed in confidence – even that he was presenting unusual symptoms to a doctor's scrutiny for analysis and judgement. He was asking for a diagnosis, that was it.

"You know," Post had said with his constant smile, "this is really a good example of what the books call a systematised fantasy, don't you agree?" He had a twenty-two carat professional manner: the exact blend of interested sympathy and studied objectivity. But he was no cheap smoothie, like the man inviting you to sign the hire-purchase agreement.

"You are, by your account, a police officer, with a highly improbable tale – you are aware how improbable it must sound, and that, not unnaturally, makes you uneasy. So you explain your presence in my house with the remark that since you have received an accusation relating to me, and since I am also a doctor, you feel that the simplest way of handling your unease is to pretend informality, coming and asking what I think of it all, inviting as it were my discreet co-operation – have I understood your somewhat confused remarks?"

"Very well. Wouldn't you agree that it was not only the simplest way but the right method? My unease – perfectly true – springs from the fact that the facts as I know them lie outside my understanding. Since you are a neurologist, I call you into consultation." He added his own smile to Post's.

"Do I even know you are a real policeman?"

Van der Valk passed his identity card across the desk.

"Most remarkable. Well, apart from repeating the obvious, that your informant, since I take it there is an informant, needs medical

treatment that I am probably not competent to give, I cannot see how I can help. I could even complain to the police department that my time was being wasted by an officer highly enough placed to know better, since you have no interrogatory commission or official standing."

This was unpleasantly slippery; van der Valk hurried off the ice.

"Come," he said, in the pleasant tone the other used, with the same perpetual smile, the same detached amusement, "come now; you wouldn't do that. If you were asked to examine a person – I won't say a patient because you are convinced, let us say, that there is nothing whatever wrong with him – you would still do so. Discreetly, dispassionately. You would not tell this man that he was either ill or well – first, quietly, you would try to find out. Aren't I right? – of course I'm right. Naturally you agree. I am a police officer. Instead of complaining that I have no commission or mandate – a thing for which there is no call or need – be glad that I don't arrive on your doorstep with a flourish, telling your secretary who or what I am, giving rise to scandal and innuendo. You may have something in your life you would not wish the police to investigate. Even little things can be very damaging to a professional man." A remark, he thought with pleasure, that could not have tripped more smoothly off the lips of the most accomplished blackmailer.

It was the smile, and the fastidious fingers, that stayed with him most after that first meeting with Dr Hubert van der Post. The smile was warm and charming, but it was Olympian. He found everything amusing because it was seen from a great height of superiority; he was set so far apart from the ruck, so far above the roughened fingers, broken nails, grimy knuckles, that he could see little but comedy in agitated sweaty little men like van der Valk. Perhaps it was less a question of vanity than a sense of humility that was missing from his character. A humiliation would be the worst blow, possibly, that anyone could give him.

Everything about him, too: his clothes, his desk, his room. Van der Valk tried to think of adjectives to fit. Delicate, exact, in exquisite taste, purified of all vulgarity. Masculine, certainly. But a little too poised, a scrap too exquisite. Would he be inclined to see all sadness, all worry as merely tiny, ludicrous incidents that could and would never touch, bother, irritate, penetrate his room?

Five

Mr Samson seemed to have found a solution to Cross-eyed Janus, unless he had simply given it up. He showed no sign of being in either a good humour or a bad one, but then he never did. He was reading a pornographic magazine, part of the loot from the unfortunate gentleman whose auto had fallen in the canal. It could not have been interesting, because he put it down almost with alacrity when van der Valk came in to make his report.

"Well now: how's your little affair?"

Van der Valk told about the cautious games with taxis around the Javakade and the remarks made by Heer Merckel, at which Mr Samson began pulling faces.

"Another one with his puritan conscience, shovelling it all on top of us. Could just as easily have knocked off this Capstan himself-assuming anybody ever did knock him off; huh?"

"Nothing to show he didn't. I was fed up, I can tell you."

"Not surprised though, I hope – you wait till you've been in this department as long as I have. There isn't one in ten of this type that has any basis in fact. They feel bothered by something they've got involved with that seems a scrap dirtier than their usual lives, and turn it around in their minds till they reach a completely illogical certainty that a crime has been committed. I've seen dozens of them. They come racing in to tell us about it and then they feel much better. Leaving me to pull the plug when they're quite finished. As for concrete evidence, that doesn't enter their scheme of things. Morality is what bothers them. If we had less morality we might have more justice. Want a dirty book? – it's bloody dull." Mr Samson was in a good mood after all. Van der Valk decided to admit that he had thought there was a little more to Mr Merckel than a suburban housewife with a guilty conscience.

"You thinking of doing anything about this doctor? Isn't anything you can do – I read that medical report – no positive indication of any interference with natural processes and without that we can't move. This Merckel of yours isn't worth a burnt match."

"I saw this doctor, though."

"You mean without getting chucked out?"

"I didn't show my card. Secretary took me for a patient, and just let me in without asking. There I was, sitting in the chair."

The commissaris pushed his glasses down and stared over them.

"Look, boy, if this doctor raises a stink, I'm the one on the block."

“He won’t complain. Complaining would make his fingers dirty. He’s far above such things. He treated it all as though it were just funny. I think, too, he’d be scared. He gave me a lot of time. There’s something there he wouldn’t want to come out.”

“You mean you think he does amuse himself with the women patients?”

“He amuses himself with everything.”

“How do you know that?”

“How does one ever know anything? He amused himself with me. It struck me afterwards. You see, I went in there and told him that I had unsupported information and that I had to look into it, blahblah, and chose to come and talk it over discreetly, unofficially – to cover myself, of course. Well. He took this up, began to weave a comic analogy. It was funny. I was a neurotic patient, come to him with fantasies, which he then has to treat. It tickled him. I’m his patient; he is going to diagnose the nature of my delusions. I liked that. I started trying to diagnose him. There’s something out of the ordinary about him.”

Mr Samson put his elbows on the table and stared at his subordinate with a square, wooden face.

“Go on,” in an ominous voice.

“I had my foot in the door, I thought, and by pure luck, since I was expecting clam-up and the-door-is-over-there. So I said to him, ‘Now that I’m your patient, I’ll be coming again for consultation - treatment too, perhaps.’ I thought he’d tell me off. He just grinned and said, ‘Perhaps your delusions will be interesting enough to warrant my continuing this file’ – the secretary had filled out one of those cardboard files with my name and age; that crap. I knew he was scared, then. He wants to keep in touch, to hear if I say anything, try and know what I think. There must be something there.”

“Yes,” agreed the old man.

“So I went out and bought myself a cardboard folder too. And wrote his goddam name on it,” finished van der Valk, and realised that he had spoken with an emphasis that had something near fury in it. Old Samson almost grinned.

“All right, my boy. Just bear one thing in mind. If this chap is playing with you, he doesn’t need to make a complaint. I see what’s in your mind. You think that because you’ve made no formal move, he can’t make a formal complaint to the Emperor Franz Josef upstairs. True, but I looked up this doctor of yours. He says one quiet word to some high pooha and your days in this department are over. He’s married to a whole family of magistrates: friends everywhere

and lord knows whom he may have in his pocket. Grateful ex-patients quite probably including the minister of justice. I won't be able to save you."

It was a long speech. Van der Valk realised that if the old man didn't approve of what he had done there would just have been a grunt – if that.

"If we stopped every time, before breaking a rule, to think what would happen if we got the sack, how many things would we miss? Would we ever get Janus, for example?" It was an impudent remark; the old man went a bit turkey-cocky.

"You bother about this doctor, and leave me to deal with Janus."

It was as near a green light as van der Valk would ever get. Mr Samson threw the magazine in the waste-paper basket as he went out. The last van der Valk saw he was stooping, purple, to fish it out again, having just remembered that the cleaning women would find it.

"How's Father?" Inspector Scholten, who shared his office, and was deep in some administrative rigmarole.

"Reading a dirty book."

"He was on the rampage this morning. Said he wished Kan were back. Minute later he said when he saw Kan he'd kick him so he'd never dare have piles again."

"Why?" since he was obviously expected to ask why.

"Kan sent in a report he'd done at home, saying he'd explored every possibility and there wasn't any legal hold on that Janus character. Old man went fair mataglap. Not my pigeon, thank God."

"Ah." Van der Valk rather thought he understood.

Six

A week later. Brilliant weather; August heat over Amsterdam. The mornings were clear and splendid, the afternoons reeled with sun and the pavements danced under temperatures in the thirties. The evenings had a pleasant coolness, but all night the thunder rumbled and the lightning flashed. Sometimes huge spots of rain fell, but always by midnight the charged clouds had passed, and the humidity with them, and the thermometer went down to sixteen, and fresh cool air flickered in at bedroom windows.

It was the silly season. Everybody was in Spain or Italy; Commissaris Samson had a chalet on a West Friesian island and was away for three weeks. Scholten was camping in a tent somewhere in the south. Kan was back, grumbling – his holiday was not due till September. As for van der Valk, he had gone on holiday in June; it had rained all the time but he hadn't cared. They had had a cottage on the Loire, belonging to Arlette's brother, who was a specialist in stressed concrete and was busy on a building project down in Toulon, where it was raining too, much to Arlette's satisfaction. They had been thoroughly lazy, doing little but swim, arguing that that way you didn't get any wetter.

He didn't care; he liked the warm weather, and the quiet; there was not much to do – it was too hot. For the sun was blazing down on Holland, and everybody was grumbling, of course, and walking about as naked as possible, sweaty and uncomfortable, guzzling fizzy lemonade whenever they got the chance. Not him. He was married to a woman who came from the Midi; he knew how to behave in warm weather, and had his shirt buttoned up and even a jacket on. He sat in the office drinking tea and beaming at Chief Inspector Kan, who looked thoroughly uncomfortable and undignified in his unaccustomed shirtsleeves, fanning himself with the latest Monthly Supplement to the General Police Standing Orders and Instructions – a singularly dismal document.

"Lamentable," he was saying. "Lamentable." Kan was rather a one for literature, and when he made out a procès-verbal had always a dictionary at his elbow, since law, he said, depended on the precise meanings of words. The hunt for the exact word preoccupied him greatly and not long ago he had put 'apotheosis' in a report, causing Mr Samson to take his glasses off and say with awful quiet, 'There are times, Chief Inspector, when I should like to take a run-up of about a hundred metres at you doing up your shoe-lace.' Kan, who was one of the new university-degree career policemen, despised Samson, and

told the inspectors sometimes that the old man 'was not oriented to modern methods'.

Still, Kan was handy in many ways. Van der Valk thought him a sharp-nosed little twerp, a pedantic fusspot, and a scared baby-sitter, but could not deny that he knew his law backwards, and, apparently, the entire history and background of every company director in Holland. He was very smart when it came to economics – and most criminal work in Holland is a question of economics – but he didn't like murders, and Samson, the old-fashioned type of policeman who had learned his work on the streets, never gave him work of this kind. He interfered as a consequence very little with van der Valk. This job now – the CMP file – he would have had a fit if he had known the things his nominal subordinate was thinking up, but the innocent had not noticed that his brains were being picked.

"Well now," he was saying, "you know that I have a lot of friends who are doctors. I looked up your man pretty carefully. Very brilliant student, came from a good family. There was a grandfather on the mother's side who was Governor General of the East Indies. People of standing. I agree, of course, that those days are gone, but it still counts, you know – you'd be surprised, van der Valk, but then you know nothing about this class of person. His wife's family carries a lot of weight too. An uncle of hers was Queen's Commissioner for one of the eastern provinces; now it's slipped my mind exactly which. It'll come back to me.

"Her father was only a canton magistrate, but there is a brother, a Substitute Officer of Justice, been transferred recently to Utrecht – getting near the top, my lad," with admiration. "And there is a cousin, an Advocate to the Court of Appeal – most distinguished family. I would say that it was that marriage more than the man himself that made him. His reputation's sound, of course, but there's something, from what I hear – he's clever enough but lacking fibre, if you understand me. He's brilliant, yes, but a thought lightweight, a scrap too unorthodox, dabbles a bit in chimerical theories. I'd almost go as far as to say that he's never been quite altogether accepted by the very top members of the profession."

Kan was well launched on just the sort of thing that pleased him: his famous accurate précis – it could not be called thumbnail – of the character and attainments of someone in public life.

"There's been a certain amount of comment on the marriage, too, I hear. She's a splendid woman, thoroughly intelligent, broad intellectual interests, knowing what is expected of her position. Naturally, one makes a remark like this guardedly, but it has been

said that people felt she'd rather thrown herself away. A man of remarkable promise, who hadn't quite fulfilled the hopes people had of him."

"Thanks very much," said van der Valk, poker-faced, busily drawing tiny imps of malice with vicious little horns and curly spiky tails in the margin of his scribbling pad. "Big help."

"You don't need the warning, of course," went on Kan generously, "but bear in mind, won't you, that people would be very slow to accept an idea of his being in any way dubious, don't you know. Even if it were only for her sake. He himself, I rather think, hasn't all that many friends; I mean close friends. Bit stand-offish, bit prickly, not really all that good a mixer and of course that's so important." He brooded, while van der Valk thought that if there were a modern version of Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help,* or a *Guide for the Rising Young Executive,* they could get Kan to write the Foreword to the Dutch Edition.

"But I wouldn't want to give you an unbalanced picture: he has a very wealthy and important circle of patients, and there's no doubt at all of his success or his talent. Just that he doesn't quite belong, you know, in the milieu where it really counts. Still, of course, you remember the sort of experience we had in that disgraceful affair we had of the one who was picked up that time for drunk driving. They all close the ranks – you'd never get one of them to come into court and say it outright."

"More or less like Janus," said van der Valk naughtily.

"Good heavens, man, there's no comparison."

"Can't see much difference."

"There are still things you have to learn," said Kan snubbingly.

"You too," amiably. "Like staying away from that horse-piss lemonade on a day like this." Chief Inspector Kan opened his mouth as soon as he had thought of a suitable phrase, but van der Valk was out of the door by then.

Seven

It had developed rapidly enough into the situation no policeman sees with any enthusiasm – a conviction, virtually a certainty, that a man is guilty of a legally punishable action, without any evidence of anything. Van der Valk had made no written reports; Mr Samson, he knew, would not want them. No jurist would glance twice at what he had, even if Merckel stood up and said all he knew, which nobody would want him to. Van der Valk knew he had been safe in agreeing to leave the banker out of it, since if he ever got anywhere with this it would be on the strength of his own scheme, aided by nothing but his own tactics.

That tactic could only be to exploit the odd acceptance with which Dr van der Post had received his challenge. Peculiar. The man could so easily have hidden behind his official image. Everything he did and everything he said to a patient was confidential, and no policeman had a right even to set foot in his house unless backed by an official order.

He had gone back to chance his luck. He would try a throw of laughable audacity, because if it didn't work there was nothing to do but go home, forget all about Dr Hubert van der Post, and six months later advise Heer Carl Merckel that we regret we do not see our way at present to granting your application for a loan. It was this course that he was prepared for, after listening to Chief Inspector Kan, and anybody else that could tell him anything about doctors.

He had rung up the secretary again and asked for another appointment, wondering what he would hear, since a brush-off would be so simple. Had she not been warned that he was unbalanced, or a hypochondriac – or a blackmailer? She would have accepted any explanation, and stalled him politely. 'The Doctor feels unable to help you, I'm afraid.' Very smooth and courteous.

But no. She had heard him say his piece, and given him an appointment without the slightest hindrance, and when he had walked again into that consulting-room it had almost been as a guest that he had been received. It had been – now, yes, embarrassing. That was the only word: it was almost as though the doctor wished, tacitly, to admit. Admit what? Why? Bravado? Sarcasm, knowing that the policeman would never find proof? None of the explanations was satisfying.

It was a fine room, originally the drawing-room. That had been in the Kaiser's time, when things were done in a big, solid way. Generous windows, with dark-ripe-apricot-coloured velvet curtains.

Velvety-expensive the olive-green wall to wall carpet. Plenty of bookshelves, a couple of decorative pictures. All of it far more front than a doctor will ordinarily present, even an expensive specialist. Outside the windows the lindens made a luxuriant pattern of sunlight-dappled green against the ivory slats of the venetian blinds. A big room, and a desk to match, placed diagonally in the corner by the windows. Long fine hands lay on the desk. They looked very relaxed; they played a little with a simple square crystal ashtray, but they did not fiddle. A fountain pen lay on the blotter, with his 'file' beside it. The telephone, the desk calendar, the other functional objects were all cleared away on a swinging typewriter table to one side.

There was a chair opposite – looked a comfortable chair at that: he had sat on it last time but he didn't remember. The thin, neat, upright man in a very well-cut formal suit had that professional but certainly attractive smile round the eyes and the wide thin mouth, just as before, and the hand in the shantung cuff pointed at the sofa.

"People often find that comfortable." A long sofa, with a severe oblong coffee-table in front of it. A very good simple vase, to match the ashtray – Vosges crystal – with tiger lilies in it today. Van der Valk liked all these things very much. Last time he had been too close to his antagonist, and had not had a chance to study the surroundings. From the sofa, too, he could survey better. Had the doctor thought of that? Was he deliberately being allowed to sit here, lower, further back, with a perspective of the room?

This furniture was modern. Over there, though, between the doors behind him, was a console table so mannered, so delicate, that he felt sure it was a faithful copy of some piece by a court ebonist of Louis Quinze. Really, Madame de Pompadour would not have found this room ugly, and he felt immediately that this beauty, this elegance, was important to the man that sat there at the desk. The elegance was not exclusively feminine, but it was a room where a woman would immediately feel at home, at ease, ready to confide, to blossom. Quite a remarkable notion I have there, thought van der Valk, making chit-chat to the man at the desk.

The man is sure of himself, he thought: absolutely smooth, his self-command unusually well administered to his features, his actions. And yet there is anxiety there. But it was not a simple guessing puzzle, for this was a complicated, sophisticated person. He shook his head to get rid of an unpleasant sensation of being trapped in cobwebs, suddenly decided to get up and walk about, and did so, rather to his own surprise, wondering what instinct had told him to

yield openly to a feeling of inadequacy.

Post's face, courteous, intelligent, good-humoured, smiled at him amusedly.

"You plainly do not expect to find help from me. But you hope, as plainly, to find that I can give you relief from the fears and distortions that press upon you. You are feeling harassed. By all means walk about if it helps you."

Van der Valk had to exert a great deal of his own self-command not to get swept off his feet by a sudden red tide of fury. Now damn the fellow's bloody cheek. He thought, deliberately, of standing on a beach, chest high in water, at the moment a big roller breaks. One wrestles to stay upright, forcing one's feet to stay buried in the shifting, swirling sand against the undertow. As the wave goes back all the sand is sucked away behind one's heels and one nearly loses all balance afresh, to sit ignominiously in the surf.

"I am walking about. It does help me."

Isn't there a kind of wrestling, he thought vaguely, where by pretending to give in you reach a winning position? Or is there a better analogy in a chess sacrifice? Now that is characteristic of my poor muddled brain; I have really very little idea how to stop myself looking ridiculous. I have no footing at all. By being friendly and pleasant and oh so co-operative, he has lured me on: I thought he was opening the door for me and so he was, to watch me fall into the pit dug inside and laugh his head off – and all I can think of is chess, a subject on which my level is roughly that of an averagely bright elementary-school child.

The only advantage he possessed, he thought while staring at a shelf of unhelpful medical literature, was a kind of vague moral force. The man was expecting an orthodox police reaction; he had to find an unorthodox reply.

He had reached the door to the back when Post made the expected remark.

"I need hardly say, my friend, that those doors lead to my examination-rooms, where I do not allow you to wander about unsupervised – nor at all without a permission I shall not, naturally, give. Even police inspectors are not allowed upon private property without impressive pieces of paper, which you do not possess simply because, as I have reminded you, you are suffering from delusions."

Van der Valk had found himself suddenly. He turned in the closed doorway, grinning, with his hands in his pockets.

"I have something funny to tell you."

The face behind the desk was so impassive that he knew it was

forcing itself, for just a second, to conceal a flicker of uncertainty.

"I see things, oddly enough, just the other way round. I find that the moment I walk into this consulting-room our positions are reversed, that the patient here is you, and the doctor is myself. Nor do I think you are suffering from delusions. I find you to be suffering from a very banal illness, as banal as nervous fatigue would be to you. An illness upon which I am the specialist. Because dishonesty, you see, is an illness. I don't just mean telling lies, of course; lies are part of the human whole, and I know from my experience that asking a man to stop telling lies is like giving him an axe and telling him to chop his big toe off. Only a very rare man has the force to do without his lies, since they are, you see, an integral part of him. Your illness is more of an infection."

"I must congratulate you on the vivacity of your illustrations," murmured the mask.

"You know what makes people – intelligent, highly trained, very perceptive people, like yourself – commit crimes? Even violent crimes, like murders? I'm not talking about little foibles like sleeping with other people's wives. It is because they are wounded in a deep sensitive part, and it is so painful that their reaction is uncontrollable. Wounded in their mechanism of self-deception, an area too complex for us poor ignorant doctors to follow, mostly."

"May I interrupt?"

"No, you mayn't. Remember your professional training. Let the deluded person run on; listen to him in patience."

"By all means." The smile had been dropped; he was glad to see that a look of slight polite boredom had been assumed.

"Now, as a doctor, suppose for a moment that I was carried here into your consulting-room with a bullet in my stomach that had penetrated the nerve centres, what treatment would you advise?"

"Surgery, my poor friend; that is what carpenters are for."

"Just so. I am only a carpenter and on that account you despise me, but they have their uses as you will see. You're coming on nicely now; I'm glad I didn't underestimate your intelligence. Quite soon now you'll be realising that I'm about to operate on you for a bad infected wound to your self-esteem that is extremely dangerous to your whole life without swift treatment."

There was a silence. Van der Valk supposed that it was the silence of a man collecting his courage rather than his wits. He had, after all, banked upon Post's being an extremely intelligent and sensitive person.

"You are beginning to realise," he went on smilingly, "that this, at

the moment, is not your consulting-room at all, but mine, and since an examination is plainly necessary to aid our diagnosis, we examine everything – in the examination-room." Theatrically, he opened the door behind him, turned calmly, and walked in. There was no protest from the desk.

"The pieces of paper which you talk about so irrelevantly" – his voice floated back through the doorway – "are things used and needed by bums with no brains. As one intelligent man, you should be able to recognise another. Lots of electrical equipment, I see - you ought to be a skilful electrician, or am I guessing?"

"Yes," came Post's quiet ironic voice this time, "but occasionally these devices' most successful use is in impressing the ignorant layman. I believe you have something of the same technique… colleague."

Van der Valk had to laugh at that.

"Admirable point. Lovely garden you have. Ah, and this is where the confident, relaxed, co-operative patient lies on the couch – very comfortable too – and gets his ills diagnosed by skilful hands. Your fingertips are probably your chief weapon – am I wrong? The invisible antennae. On your branch of medicine I'm pretty ignorant, I'm bound to admit. We specialists are pretty much all the same, though; what do you know, for instance, about the diseases of the lung?"

"Practically nothing."

"That's our trouble; we just can't keep up with modern science even if we were to spend all day reading up the newest literature. My, what a lovely bathroom; makes me feel unwashed as hell. Another psychological aid, I take it, to the patient's confidence in his recovery – or is it purely for your personal use? I must congratulate you on your taste in material objects. And on a very nice, very well arranged house. We come out here, no doubt," reappearing suddenly, with a broad beam of self-satisfaction.

Post was sitting still, placidly smoking a cigarette. Van der Valk sat down heavily in the chair opposite.

"I am an honest man," he said. "I mustn't tell you I know yet exactly how to treat your case. My diagnosis isn't complete, I can see that. But of course, as always, recovery depends upon the patient in the end, hm? Since you are evidently going to help me, I have confidence in your recovery. Well, we are both busy men, and I mustn't take up more of your expensive time. But next time we meet I shall hope to find you on the right road; getting better."

Post said nothing at all. Just smoked his cigarette in a mannered

careful way, and looked at him amiably.

Outside on the pavement van der Valk shook his head at his own performance, so crude, so coarse, so uncivilised by comparison with Post's. I should be a fairground salesman, he thought, that's about my speed. Selling some quack cure – all in a pretty bottle to astounded villagers. Contains real gold, ladies and gentlemen, and only two-fifty the half litre. Van der Valk the tally-boy; live now and pay later. But there's no doubt, that's the approach with a civilised type like the good Dr van der Post. He felt mightily pleased with his awful self.

Eight

Next morning, back in the office, he was less inflated, less horribly pleased with himself, but still feeling lucky. It was undoubtedly the weather, that he enjoyed, that made everything light and bright around him, that gave him energy and speed, that protected him from the landslide of gloomy depression that generally followed an early success in one of his affairs. But no, really he couldn't help it, couldn't feel like a wooden police official, dependent on a mountain of administrative paper, surrounded by the querulous nagging of clowns like Chief Inspector Kan – not in this light that bathed Amsterdam in a dusty golden shimmer. The smell of green, of leaves, of shooting flowering bushes, was too strong, even conquering the sewer smell of the canal, and the inky-cardboardy smell of the office. And Mr Samson was on an island, and Scholten was in a tent, and that juggle-buggle of a Kan was lost somewhere in a perfect epidemic of autothefts. The autos seemed mostly to belong to German tourists; why was that? Was it simply that they contained a richer loot of money and passports, cameras and binoculars? – or was it some cunning notion perhaps master-minded by Cross-eyed Janus? Van der Valk didn't know and didn't care, and if he were Kan, he thought happily, he'd go to Zandvoort and lie on the beach, and watch the German tourists playing with their expensive beach toys, and think with content of the unfortunate police of Köln – even more swamped by the epidemic than they were here. Summer madness… August heat. Van der Valk, who had bought a paper bag full of greengages on his way to work, wiped juice off his chin and felt happy. He had to go and wash; when he got back he felt like making a nuisance of himself and telephoned Mr Carl Merckel on his private line.

"Speaking." As though he didn't know; that grey, guarded, neutral voice.

"Here van der Valk. I'd like to see you. Before, during or after lunch – not knowing your appointments I leave it open."

"You have something conclusive to say to me?"

"I've a slight case of sunstroke. Say the word."

"It does not sound as though I have much choice," vexed.

"No," blandly.

"I have no lunch appointment. One o'clock precisely, in the Chinese restaurant opposite the Concert Building."

Good heavens, thought van der Valk, what extraordinary precautions to avoid being seen. He knew it well, an unpretentious place needing repainting, but the food was good; being much

frequented by the musicians from over the road it had to be.

"Sweet and sour everything – and lots of shrimp crackers," he told the boy in the white jacket.

"Well?" said Merckel, still sounding vexed.

"I've taken up the matter you would probably have preferred me not to take up."

"How can you possibly know, or claim to know, what I prefer?"

"Why, I'll admit to you that the overwhelming impression I had when we met was of someone who wishes to avoid a responsibility and who makes a criminal indictment with every effort to minimise its possible truth or even likelihood."

"You do not know me well, I see. Enquire among those of your associates who know something of the business world whether I am afraid of responsibility."

"If you had not considerable moral courage, I agree, you would have kept silence altogether," lightly. "There must be many things you would not be happy to have me know."

"I distinguished, I recall, between the private, I presume discreet knowledge of a police officer under oath, and the public, uninformed insinuations of the press."

"That is precisely the position of my new acquaintance Dr van der Post. He does not mind my asking, guessing, even knowing all sorts of things as long as it is kept inside the walls of his consulting-room. What might be said outside would be a much naughtier idea, but he knows that I have no convincing evidence. He realised, however, that however disagreeable company I may be, I am a great deal preferable to the press."

"Are you telling me that my suppositions about this man are true but that you either cannot or do not propose to do anything about it?"

"Some of it is certainly true, I think. All of it even, possibly. What you suggest might easily turn out to be the case. Wouldn't be unheard of. I might even say it happens every day," tranquilly, with his mouth full of shrimp cracker.

Merckel laid down his soup-spoon, wiped his mouth meticulously, and turned a cold eye on the policeman.

"You give me an impression – I have no wish to sound offensive – of being decidedly lukewarm."

"I am lukewarm. I would warm up if I knew more things that I think have been kept from me hitherto. Have I, Mr Merckel, all the information you can give me? Suppose, for instance, I imagined the likely hypothesis that your wife had received blackmail threats also.

And that she had gone to her doctor, perhaps insisting that he remove the source of pressure and pain?"

Merckel looked, surprisingly, extremely shocked, as if this had never occurred to him.

"She has a very strong sense of values," he said sharply. "She would have come to me, knowing that I would give her every support and that I would stand by her no matter what."

"No doubt. But in her loyalty to you, she might think that none of this must reach you. That your position – more, your integrity, your honour; you have a very strong sense of honour – must not be smeared or even touched. Assume by all means that she would not think of any violent means of retaliating. She would then pay blackmail money, thinking it safer and easier to stand for the squeeze. How much could she pay without your noticing?"

"It's unheard of," muttered Merckel furiously.

"You see, it's not enough to insist on meeting me where no one would recognise you. It has not even occurred to you that I am, in different circles, I grant, as widely known a figure in this town as you are. Here, for example – full of musicians – I might easily be recognised. I might even be seen by someone who would have very little trouble, and might easily think that little bit worth taking, uncovering your own identity. You will have to get accustomed to numerous ideas, including that of my questioning your wife."

Merckel gave him a slow look. Not furious or unhappy, but appraising, as though he were sizing up a man who had asked him for the loan of money.

"Well, Mr van der Valk," he said at last. "I see that my notion that you would not show vigour was wide of the mark. You have evidently seen Dr van der Post and are not, apparently, afraid of what he could do to your career. What conclusions you have really drawn from this visit are not my business. I now ask you whether you have thought what I can do to your career. As you remarked when I first met you, I am acquainted with a number of persons prominent in public life."

"Yet you still came to me. Perhaps you were sure that we would be careful not to probe too deep. If we were able to pin a crime - any crime – on the good doctor, that would destroy his reputation and you would be content. But the idea of your wife being a likely suspect of a possible murder – and it was you, Mr Merckel, who first mentioned the word – we would be too tactful to let that occur to us. Of course. You got the wrong man."

Merckel smiled contemptuously.

"You have as mistaken an impression of me as most people," drily. "I am pleased that you do not allow yourself to be intimidated; if you did you would be of singularly little use. If you wish to talk to my wife do so by all means; I do not stand in your way. I ask you to respect my original wish for discretion and not to mention my name, even to her."

"Why shouldn't your name be mentioned?"

"That concerns me."

"I'll respect that," careful to make no protest or further query.

Lot of things I don't understand in that quarter as well, he thought, having a little stroll; the trouble with Chinese food is that one invariably eats too much of it. I think I would almost have preferred it if Merckel had made more objection to my questioning his wife. He sounds pretty sure of her. Still…

He had to get an auto; Merckel lived out in Aerdenhout, on the far side of Haarlem. One of the creamy residential districts of Holland; elegant quiet streets lined with trees, down which purred elegant quiet autos, lined with bank-notes; the plebeian Volkswagen, in these streets, made a noise like the umbrella of classical tradition dropped on the floor of the British Museum. The streets wound aristocratically in and out of one another, noiseless but for the tocking whirr of lawnmowers: the villas all looked the same and all rather ugly, with cedars, plenty of grass lush from the automatic sprinkler, a slight tendency to stained glass and bulbous grandiosities, and a patrician disregard of street-numbers. He had leisure to admire a good deal of gaudy garden furniture strewn about among the cedars before he found the right house, and the usual Spanish maid to take his card, on the back of which he had scribbled, 'I have just had lunch with your husband'.

Mrs Merckel was installed in one of those swinging garden sofas with fringes and a canopy, pretending to be reading *Ideal Homes* with an eye cocked on his approach. He had expected her to try an icy madam act, gaze fixed on his shoes (they were quite expensive shoes, since any policeman is kind to his feet, but they needed mending and could have done with a lick of polish). He was agreeably surprised when she jumped up, in a lithe, active way, offered her hand, and said, "I am Mrs Merckel; how do you do", in a voice that had a pleasant warmth in it, like a ripe apricot.

"Do sit down. Have some orange juice?"

"Yes, please." She poured him a glass full, out of a Provençal earthenware jug that made a nice tinkling sound of ice-cubes and had that primitive look he liked, as though it had been dug up in a field

with bones of ancient Gauls.

"Cigarette? Oh, I love those ones of yours; may I have one?" It made a good impression, easy and unaffected and no kittenish gurgling.

She was a solid, well-constructed woman, not fat at all but all curves, with the very fine-textured, pearly skin that goes so well with dark chestnut hair. Small good teeth, quite rare in Holland, where the women have excellent teeth looking like a well-polished row of marble gravestones. A big wide comic mouth. She should have had large clear brown eyes, but they were small, with crinkles round them, and brilliant dark blue. He liked this face, and he liked her for not trying to hide behind the dark glasses, which she had taken off to look at him with a kind of honest curiosity.

"I must sound awfully inquisitive, but lunch with my husband sounds quite important, and I'm wondering where I come in?"

"That is quite easily told. My name is van der Valk, I am an inspector of the recherche in the Amsterdam Police, and trouble is my business, as Sam Spade used to say. Has anybody ever tried to blackmail you, Mrs Merckel?" The well-known raid technique: the amiable little domestic pleasantry and the bomb in the same breath. Van der Valk, the smiler with the knife.

No, he could swear the reaction was genuine; she was too unguarded and too spontaneous.

"I'm sorry…but talk about a bolt out of the blue… Do you mean my husband thinks…?…oh…" It had suddenly come to her to wonder why anyone should think she was being blackmailed, and she immediately looked stricken.

"Don't look so worried," kindly. After the flash, the burn cream. "I think I know why someone might, possibly, have tried to blackmail you." She looked then with relief at him, wanting to be open, but too cautious to put her feet in the water before she knew how cold it was likely to be.

"What has my husband told you?"

"Nothing. I told him. A little succession of things that had come to my notice, giving me a notion that an attempt of the sort might have been made." There was something rather theatrical about this talk, he thought. Blackmail, in this summery birdy garden, sitting on a padded swinging sofa on the lawn, innocently drinking orange juice with a pretty woman in primrose yellow shorts and a white shark-skin shirt. It did not sound convincing at all. He didn't mind, because he didn't believe in it either. She was looking wary, but there was something transparent about this woman that was a most attractive

quality.

"Did you ever hear of a man called Casimir Cabestan?"

"No. Sounds like a juggler in a cabaret."

"A painter – quite well known at one time."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about painting."

"Mrs Merckel, I'm going to tell you quite honestly what I know about all this, and you can tell me then quite honestly whether it means anything to you, and if so, whether there are things I don't know, or have maybe misunderstood."

She laughed now. She had never heard of Capstan, as Mr Samson called him, and that made her think she was in the clear. It was evident that she thought he was driving at something else altogether, and was greatly relieved about it.

"I'm quite willing to try," amiably.

"This Cabestan – your husband knew him slightly, because a good few years ago he did a portrait, it appears, for him – lived in a flat in Amsterdam, on top of a house owned by a Dr Hubert van der Post. I say lived, because, you see, he is dead." The laughter went out of the eyes and they glanced around nervously before she fixed them on the ground, pretending to be puzzled.

"I know Dr Post of course; he has treated me. But I'm afraid I've never heard…"

"I'm going to put this quite bluntly, so please forgive me. The implication is that this man got the idea that you and the doctor were too friendly, and was so certain he could establish this that he decided to try and make trouble."

"Have you told my husband this?"

"Yes. Your husband is interested in nothing but in supporting you, and if necessary protecting you. And so am I; it is what I am here for."

"Do you mean that Dr van der Post complained to the police that this horrible man tried to – to get money from him – with this revolting tale?"

"No, Mrs Merckel. The man is dead. He may have been a horrible man; we don't know, yet. But he's dead, and when a man dies soon after an attempt to extort money it may be a complete coincidence but we do tend to believe that there may have been something in his story."

"You don't mean perhaps that you think I killed this man?"

"Hush, not so loud. No, I don't. It might be thought, not necessarily by me, that your husband did."

“But that’s impossible. You simply don’t know my husband. He’s intensely scrupulous, very very upright – even if something…”

“Mrs Merckel, the story is true, isn’t it? You are, or have been, the doctor’s mistress?”

“Oh my god. Yes.”

“Listen, this is very important. Your husband – and I – wish to keep this whole tale from the public, the press, maybe even from a court, where you might be called as a witness, upon oath. He is as concerned for your good name as for his own. You must be quite straightforward with me; if you try to bottle up anything you know you simply increase the risk of its coming out another way. Better me, your husband, a few lawyers, than the boulevard press. Are you sure now that you know of no effort to blackmail you, or your husband, or the doctor?”

“No. Honestly.”

“Have you seen him in the last three weeks?”

“No.”

“Phoned?”

“No. Wait. He did phone me, but only to ask whether I was all right. It’s true – really – that I wasn’t quite well, not ill but not quite a hundred per cent, and he did make me better. He did call up maybe two to three weeks back; I couldn’t say for sure. But he just asked whether I had any troubles.”

“In those words – any troubles?”

“Well, I can’t swear to the words. He might have said troubles, or bothers, or miseries – but meaning just was I all right.”

“Or, possibly, meaning has anyone tried to blackmail you?”

“But – I suppose it could be twisted – but I knew nothing; how could I have guessed – god, what have I done?”

“Let me give you a piece of advice. Don’t say anything at all to your husband, unless he does, and I feel myself extremely sure that he won’t. He will behave exactly as he always does; do the same.”

“But if my name gets in the paper?”

“It won’t. Dr Post has many patients. None of them would be at all happy if this business gets broadcast. The trouble is that someone was banking on exactly that fact. You get on well with your husband, don’t you?”

“Very well indeed. This is the second marriage, you know, for both of us. Perhaps that’s why some things appear strange…” Her voice trailed off; she decided not to try and explain or justify.

“Neither of you has any children?”

“My husband hasn’t. I have a daughter from my first marriage - she’s sixteen now. She’s studying art at the Royal College. But that isn’t an obstacle between us if that’s what you’re thinking. Carl is devoted to Suzanne, quite openly. Perhaps the more since he has none of his own. In fact, I’ll tell you quite frankly, Mr van der Valk, because I don’t want any misunderstandings, if my husband’s attitude seems odd to you it doesn’t to me. He’s fond of me, certainly, but if he appears, how shall I put it, indulgent towards any failings of mine it will be more for Suzanne’s sake than for mine, or even for his, touchy though he is about his good name.”

“Thank you, Mrs Merckel. If I do have to come back again, I’ll try and be very discreet about it. Remember what I said – be the same.”

Attractive woman, he thought as he drove off. He didn’t know that he felt altogether quite so indignant about Dr van der Post.

Nine

Before going home he phoned an acquaintance, a man who owned a picture shop, dealer and restorer in a small and specialised but skilful way, who always amused him. Charles was a lucky person, always effervescent, with an enormous sense of the ridiculous and limitless ability to enjoy himself.

"Hallo, Charles. No, don't tell me how you are; it takes too long. Are you well up in modern artists? Come come, you move in the circle – you go to the parties, you can speak the absurd language."

"What circle?" crossly. "There are dozens; they don't necessarily intersect." Charles' voice always came over the telephone in a high scream. "And there aren't any modern artists. There used to be a few but they've all run away to Paris like wise men. That was forty years ago anyway. Now they're all terribly old-fashioned, and can only paint with torn up dirty newspaper or bits of old bicycles. Deathly boring and totally unsaleable. There is of course Pop Art. You want a quick course in Pop Art?"

"No. I want a quick course in Casimir Cabestan."

"That gin-sodden old fraud? There you are – went to Paris forty years ago, was stupid enough to come back because he didn't get the admiration there he felt he deserved – never been any good since except for very young girls."

"What's this about girls?"

"Nobody knows. Cas looks the revolting old wreck he is every inch, but possesses a sort of eerie appeal for tiny little girls of fourteen, whose blood he drinks. He generally has two or three in tow."

"Had, you mean. Been dead nearly a month."

"You don't tell me. Well, all I can say is it really was high time. That just shows you – I have little or no contact with these circles as you call them."

"Yes, but since you know about the tiny girls you plainly saw him from time to time. You will know the stamping ground – perhaps where these famous tiny girls were collected, or paraded, or whatever."

"Oh that. Yes, a sort of squalid dive they call the New Arts Club. Was probably new when Berthe Morisot was a tiny little girl. Now I've got it; you want to be taken? When? Tonight if you like."

"It really is deplorable, this place," Charles was saying a few hours later; he was looking very fetching in a dark olive-green suit and an

enormous yellow carnation. “It belongs perfectly to Casimir’s era; one expects to see people like Ezra Pound all shaggy and youthful. Casimir fancied himself as a sort of painters’ Scott Fitzgerald. I suppose we have to say Poor Old now instead of Dirty Old. But the poor dears have nowhere to go. They still gather here and talk all excited about Trends. I haven’t been here in a year. Now who are you today, if I may ask?”

“I’d better be Mr Petersen, come from Denmark, awfully keen about art. Do these types speak French?”

“Artists’ French, fearfully twee. Here we are.”

They had reached a very dingy entrance in a dingy street full of wholesalers, squashed in between the Damrak and the old quarter. The New Arts Club occupied a basement under a building filled to bursting point, as far as van der Valk could tell, with old rags and papers done up in bundles.

“They’re always praying there’ll be a fire upstairs and then they could run away to Tahiti with the insurance money,” said Charles. “Belong, you see, to the time when people really did run away to Tahiti. That’s old Ben over there.”

The light was excessively dim, but van der Valk distinguished a few eccentric haircuts, though quite unable to say whether male or female. Behind a candle stuck on the tiny bar, in the grave of thousands of other candles forming a dusty and discoloured volcano of grease, loomed a dishevelled man looking about sixty, with a monastic hairdo, a goatee, a blue sailor’s jumper, and mermaids tattooed on the backs of his hands. His face was quite weather-beaten, but in a pasty way, like a Pirate of Penzance that has forgotten to put his make-up on.

“Hallo, Ben, how are you, old chap? This is a friend, comes from Denmark, so let’s all speak French, shall we?”

“Grand, my dears, grand. And how about a wee droppie?” The voice of this square-rigger crimp was that of the eternal hanger-on; piping, precious. The tattooed hand sketched a coy arabesque in the air and a gin bottle appeared.

“Mr Petersen was having a chat about old days and happened to mention Casimir, whom he knew before the war in Paris. We thought we’d find him here.”

“Oh, haven’t you heard? – poor, poor old Cas. Daid. Yais sir, daid.” The voice had dropped into a sort of pretend-American, as though it thought it had strayed back somehow into Sylvia’s Bookshop. “So tragic. Just a few weeks ago, only. Ah, Charlie, my dear, the old faces drop out one by one.”

"Ben, I am not an old face, so don't include me. But what about the young faces? Surely there were some sweet young faces gathered round at the end?"

"No, no, he was all alone in the flat; heart attack. Young Harry Simons found him after nobody'd seen him for a day or two. As for the gorgeous lovelies, the last one I ever saw was a perfect pet. Cas called her his Sweet Sue, but she didn't come in to us. He brought her a couple of times to show her off, but she didn't really belong, you know. Amateur girl, Charlie, some rich pig's spriglet out slumming. Young Harry might know, of course, but we haven't seen him either lately. Got above the friends who gave him his start." Not a bad witness, thought van der Valk professionally. They notice and record everything; you just have to know what percentage of that harmless tattling malice you have to discount.

"Well, well," Charles was saying. "That's all rather an unhappy coincidence, isn't it, Mr Petersen? Pity, pity, poor old Cas. We'll have to be running along: so long, Ben, old boy, give my love to Art."

"Any good?" asked Charles back in his white Renault coupé that amused van der Valk as much as the carnation did.

"I'd like to hear more about this Harry, and Sweet Sue. I want to find someone that knew this old drunk closely in the last months."

"Yes, I see. Or rather I don't see but I don't intend to ask. Well, I can find Harry for you. This Sue I know nothing of. I warn you, Harry Simons is a nasty little beast, who thinks of nothing but money, and what I don't understand is his having any interest in old Cas, most of whose work changes hands for the price of the canvas."

"Tell me briefly and simply what this Harry is."

"Harry is the son of old Simons, who was a good picture man and knew his stuff, and was respected by all. Had a gallery in Paris and one here. Got caught resisting and was turned into soap. Harry was a boy then, safe in America. Turned up a few years ago with a very bright line of patter; knew it all. The going in Paris was too rough but he flourishes here. He's quite a patron of these pop-art laddies and he knows that crowd in the cellar, but as old Ben did not fail to point out Harry cultivates old dames in mink coats and thinks himself a cut above garret-starvers. Cas, who is sudden death to a dealer and has been ever since the war, wouldn't be any use to our bright Harry. Get it?"

"I get it. Since you know him, can you work me in?"

"Sure. He's no friend of mine; runs around with all the pseudo-intellectuals. But I can phone him – shall we see if he's in?"

"Yes."

"Luck," said Charles, coming back from a phone box. "In, and expecting you; I'll drop you if you like. You are keen on modern art. He's hooked, because he can't understand why I should pass such a bird on to him, knowing as he does that I hate his guts."

The flat was near the park, only two streets away from the brass plate announcing Dr van der Post's calling. But this street was a lot less attractive; trees had been cut and speculative builders with more of other people's money than taste of their own had remodelled the houses with uninspired modernism. Van der Valk gazed at Harry's address, a large block of service flats without character or interest, trying to remember the limerick about the man who got on the blower to Mies van der Rohe.

One went up in a lift after looking for the number among rows of letterboxes. The landing had a pale violet carpet and orange-yellow walls; the lift had violet walls and an orange carpet. Van der Valk pressed a buzzer. A man of about thirty opened the door, dark and good-looking, with a supple, fine-boned body. Didn't look particularly Jewish, but more as though modelled on a South American polo-player. He was wearing jodhpurs with soft beautiful cowboy boots under them and an angora sweater, all in different shades of milky coffee. A blue silk shirt completed the colour scheme of a Siamese cat. Van der Valk looked to see whether he had little silver bells around his neck but was disappointed.

"Come in, come in," hospitably. "Whisky?"

"That would be very nice."

There were more luscious colour-schemes inside; the living-room was dark dull crimson and old gold, with a white coffee-table and white curtains. It was large and there was not much furniture, but plenty of art. Van der Valk sank languorously into a long long low low divan, clutched a glass of Stand Fast with a feeling that the name was inappropriate, and concluded that Mr Simons mixed business with pleasure.

"Have a look about you," said Simons negligently. "All this comes in and out very rapidly, of course, but while it's here it's all for sale. Or have you some special name in mind?"

"Yes, I have, to tell the truth. Cabestan. I was wondering whether any of his early work was for sale."

Fine dark eyebrows arched at him.

"I knew him slightly but I don't deal in his work. I understood from Mr van Deijssel…"

"He didn't really know what the object of my interest was. I think that Casimir's been a little over-neglected."

Simons considered this with slow nods.

"That could be. Say, though, it might even be an idea. One might be able to revive some of his stuff, especially the early work as you say. You could buy now and get a rock-bottom price. Why shouldn't we get together on this? I take it your aim is to encourage a market? I should be able to get some for you, I think. Starting perhaps with a particular line – what is your especial interest - portraits perhaps?"

It came like a cue to van der Valk. "Girls."

"You mean nudes?"

"I haven't said that I was interested in buying pictures at all, Mr Simons. I don't want to carry on this conversation under false pretences. I am an inspector of police of the city of Amsterdam, and there are some queries in my mind about this death. My especial interest in Cabestan is girls, but not on canvas. Live girls. They can be nude or not, just as you prefer," pleasantly.

Harry took his time about sitting down and pouring out a whisky; the decanter, thought van der Valk, a squat Swedish thing, was a bad lumpy shape. He leaned back, glanced round, saw a piece of art that struck him as more obnoxious than most and put his tongue out at it.

"I don't see how I can help you," said Harry warily. It didn't have to mean anything that he was wary: he was the type that always is, and most suspects a trap when there isn't one. They are so dishonest that they are flummoxed completely by someone being honest. "I remember telling you that I knew him, but I saw very little of him and have no knowledge about his life."

"Before his death," quietly, "Cabestan was seen around quite a good deal with a girl. A young and pretty girl, as I have heard the kind he habitually had dangling."

"That's true," with a big open smile. "Old Casimir certainly did have a way of finding girls."

"You know this girl?"

"My dear man, I hardly knew him, let alone his girls. I have a vague notion she is an art student of sorts. I have seen her, I think."

"It was you who found Cabestan dead, I believe?"

"Yes, it was," fluently. "I'd been after him some time – I heard he had a whole bundle of drawings, early work by quite a few people he knew in Paris, and I was thinking of offering him a price for them. I couldn't make out why he didn't answer his bell, and I suggested at the house downstairs that he might be ill, and a sort of secretary person called the police – it was they, incidentally, that found him, not me. I was simply there."

"What is the girl's name?"

“Good heavens, I don’t know. Or I can’t recall. I was introduced to her at a party, I remember – Jill, Janet, something like that. I talked with her a minute or two – you know how parties are. I have a memory of a pretty enough girl, that’s all.”

“I see,” with an internal grin. “I’d like to find this girl, you see. I’d like you to throw your mind back carefully and remember who introduced you to her.”

The silky eyebrows knitted handsomely; big thought.

“There were several people there I know more or less well. I really can’t tell for certain. It might have been Mrs van der Post.”

Van der Valk’s turn to model eyebrow-knitting on this languid example.

“Really? Mrs van der Post?”

“Yes, I dare say you know her. She’s a good customer of mine.”

“Isn’t she the wife of some doctor?”

“I believe she is; I’ve never met him; don’t know him at all.”

“And was Cabestan at this party?”

“I don’t recall that he was – no, no, that’s unlikely. I might be quite mistaken about Mrs van der Post; Cas being in my mind, you see, and the fact is that he lived in her house, up above – I might have imagined a connection that doesn’t exist. I just remember chatting with her at that party.”

“Who gave this party?” Simons didn’t quite like answering.

“A television producer I know a bit – Arthur de Vries – out in Blaricum. But that’s all three or four months ago. I’m afraid I really can’t help you any more.”

“That’s all right,” said van der Valk generously. He really was content. This artistic cowboy wouldn’t have told too many lies, because too much of his tale could be checked, and for all he knew van der Valk had already checked.

“Just one final remark, Mr Simons. It might be an excellent notion to try and create a market for nudes by Casimir, but don’t get any idea of calling the press to get yourself a bit of publicity. It has a way of rebounding. And if any pressmen get to hear that the police were interested in Casimir, I’d know who told them. Get me? And if I told that, there might be a whole lot of people not at all grateful to you. People who might be capable of doing your business a great deal of harm. All right? Just remember – keep your mouth shut.” Harry Simons’ bright black eyes had an odd expression that might have been knowing and might have been puzzled but was definitely quite intelligent in a faintly repulsive way; van der Valk didn’t think he would try and promote himself any press publicity. As for the

caginess, these people couldn't breathe unless they were being cagy about something, but what on earth was there to be cagy about where Casimir's girlfriends were concerned and why should Mr Simons feel hot and bothered about 'a pretty enough girl, that's all'? 'A rich man's spriglet out slumming,' old Ben had said. It all sounded harmless enough; nothing to get evasive about. Van der Valk walked the kilometre odd back to his home. It was a perfect summer night; everywhere on the streets were crowds of gay, laughing, slightly drunken tourists. He felt curious, and a bit inclined to pester Mr Simons.

At home he undid his shoes, wiggled his toes, kissed his wife and reached for the telephone book. Blaricum, mm, out Hilversum way. He dialled.

"Might I speak to Mr de Vries?"

"I'm afraid he's at the studio; if it's on business you could try there."

"No, no – personal."

"Well, can I take the message? This is Mrs de Vries – who is calling, please?"

"Oh, I'm a friend of Harry Simons. I just came from his house - we were talking, as it chanced, about your husband."

"Oh, really? I was talking to Harry just a while back but he said he'd ring the studio."

"Ah yes, must be the same thing we were discussing."

"Shall I give you the number, Mr…?… I didn't catch your name."

"Don't trouble yourself, Mrs de Vries; it'll do in the morning, thank you so much again."

He rang off and beamed at his wife, who had raised eyebrows.

"What were you putting on that affected voice for?" she asked.

"Ha. I've been moving amongst the intellectuals – putting up with some modern art, and picking up their little ways, don't you know."

"It sounds awful when you do it – I don't mind Charles."

"Exactly. Dear Charles; he put me on to this. Let's ring him up… Charles?… I've had a nice chat with Harry. Don't worry; I said you knew nothing about it. But this girl of Casimir's – you know, this Susie – there's something funny there. Harry knows her, which wouldn't be noteworthy or even interesting. But he pretends he doesn't know her, and that is most interesting. He even rings up a fellow who knows something about it to enjoin him to be discreet. Any ideas about that?"

"I should just say he was being tricky out of force of habit. People

always lie to policemen."

"Yes indeedy. Especially when anybody has died. You see no significance?"

"What's a girl called Susie more or less? That old Cas always had a couple in tow – the usual vacant teenagers."

"Then why make such an elaborate pretence of knowing nothing about them?"

"Oh go to bed and stop fussing."

He put the phone back, pleased with himself. "This is my night for being direct and blunt," he told Arlette. "Find me Simons, H in the book, will you?"

"Sounds like your night for collecting a phone bill. Why not do this in the office – then you wouldn't have to pay for them?"

"I just feel extravagant. Is there any milk? I'd like some cocoa very much if you could manage it… Hallo, Mr Simons. Inspector van der Valk here. What? Well no, the night's still young. How was Arthur? Hard at work boring the public? Now I would like you to tell me the girl's name, please, and at once. Yes, that is all, quite all. My dear fellow, say once more that you don't know and you'll find a summons to attend at the headquarters bureau on your desk tomorrow, which will bore you even more than it will me. No, no, pally-wally, I need no explanations. I need them not, I wish them not, I desire them not. Wilde, thank you. Sleep tight…"

"Haven't we any whisky?"

"Certainly not."

"Pity. I would have enjoyed whisky. One more tiny call; let's see, I've got the number written somewhere…hidden amidst all this evidence… Hallo? Mrs Merckel? Inspector van der Valk; I'm very sorry to bother you. Entirely my fault; a tiny point of no importance that I should have asked you this afternoon and stupidly forgot. Your name from your first marriage. Wilde? Thank you very much, and my apologies again for disturbing you."

Ten

Arthur de Vries was one television producer with no beard. He had rimless glasses, and a bright happy-to-know-you smile, and pale shiny skin. There were little cushions of smooth plumpness distributed all around his face, as though the bony bits needed something comfortable to sit on. A good deal of very white shirt covered a stocky body; he had, too, elaborately plaited and decorated moccasin shoes, and liked to talk a kind of weird Hilversum-Manhattan English, as though wanting to remind everyone that he had once made a trip to New York.

When van der Valk arrived at the studio in Bussum he was very matey; come in the sanctuary and let's see if we can rustle up a cup of coffee. At home, no doubt, he would have Martinis for the guests, in a 'pitcher'. He had been primed to be vague about anyone called Simons, so van der Valk didn't mention anybody called Simons.

"Yes, I do recall a party – it was for my wife's birthday, but you know how these parties are."

"No, I don't. I'm not a great party-goer. That's what I've come for – so that you could tell me."

"Well, you know, these parties tend to fill up with people one may owe a bit of hospitality to – or people you regard as fairly interesting company but not much more. There might be thirty people you know well enough to say Hallo-Joe-how's-it-going, but only three you really know anything much about."

Van der Valk acknowledged all this worried apologia with the faint polite smile.

"Which category would you put Mrs van der Post in?" Arthur, who had been expecting a different name, beamed and became even more voluble.

"Now that illustrates perfectly what I mean because I know her, yes, but just the way everybody knows her. Everybody invites her because she's one of the good mixers. Intelligent, bright, good-looking, poised – delightful woman. Knows everybody herself, no worry having to run about bringing her into things. And knows all the stuff we're likely to be talking about: you know – she's really with it." It was delivered with wholehearted approval; praise could have flown no higher.

Van der Valk had decided to take lessons from this prodigious female. Be easy, engaging, disarming. If poss, be with it.

"Suppose now," he said – engagingly – drinking tea, "she was a character in a play, and you wanted to give me a sketch of a key

personage. You are hoping, perhaps, that I will finance a production or whatever. You want to make her very real, very convincing. How would you present her? Appearance, manner, character."

Arthur beamed some more, tickled with the notion.

"Sounds like a party game. Still, let's see. Well dressed in a rather formal way, always gloves, you know, and just enough good jewellery, and just been to the hairdresser. Must be in her forties, but looks younger, say about thirty-five. Quite slim, moves well, nice quiet voice. Blonde hair, bright, looking a little metallic, but not artificial. Blue eyes that protrude a scrap. Good teeth. Very elegant, very poised.

"Let's see: she's calm, cool, gives an impression of balance and judgement – controlled, what you'd call unemotional. Doesn't smoke, doesn't drink. I suppose that all sounds dry, rather lacking in impact, but that isn't so. I'm fond of Bea; she's a grand person. She can listen to one's problems – you feel you can confide in her."

Arthur waved his cigarette through the air in a confiding pattern; he was getting quite carried away by his party game, and continued zestfully.

"She's got no zing – I mean she's good-looking but you don't think of her as attractive first and foremost. You wouldn't get the feeling after three highballs of cuddling up to bedroom eyes with Bea, but you'd listen to what she had to say. She's reliable. And she's a grand temperature-taker. I mean say we were discussing a play or something, you might ask her 'How did you think that little scene in the auto?' and she'd say 'Too quick' or 'Too slow' and you'd see at once she was dead right. I say, Inspector, I am talking a lot though, aren't I? Poor old Arthur, they say, you can't stop him once he puts the nickel in. How did I shape up: did I score high or low on the old projection test?"

"Not bad at all," grinning. "No need to worry about topping out just yet awhile."

"Ah ha ha, you know the language, I see. You sure, though, you don't mind if I have to dash now, because it'll pile up there without me?"

"You go on right ahead," said van der Valk. "The play's the thing wherein we catch the conscience of the other thing."

"Splendid, splendid," said Arthur approvingly, feeling very clever at having avoided all reference to Harry Simons.

It was all too neat, too pat, he found on his way back to Amsterdam. Each character linked so smoothly to the other, and all too much in a careful little pattern that would delight the heart of

imbeciles like Arthur. Six characters in search of an author.

Doctor has mistress, mistress has daughter, daughter knows painter, painter knows – presumably – doctor's wife, painter blackmails doctor. Cog slipping somewhere in that wheel.

Painter knows gigolo, painter knows daughter of doctor's mistress. Gigolo knows daughter. Does painter know of doctor's mistress through daughter? Does gigolo know? Gigolo knows doctor's wife? Does gigolo know of painter's little schemes? Are they even gigolo's little schemes?

This is exactly like a fruit machine. We could go on all day and never hit the jackpot. Try another.

Painter blackmails banker, banker's wife sleeps with doctor, banker's daughter knows gigolo, gigolo knows doctor's wife. No further.

Doctor has possibly knocked off painter. Alternatively doctor has guilty knowledge of someone else knocking off painter. Who? Could be any of the fruit in the machine.

Doctor is undoubtedly scared. Not very scared. Perhaps not scared at all and scared is the wrong word. If scared, then perhaps not scared enough? Perhaps has nothing to be scared about really, bar scandal. Not very afraid of scandal. Too many notables involved. Doctor's notable patients, wife's notable family, banker's notable damn-near-everything.

Does gigolo know or has gigolo guessed anything about the blackmail?

There's no doubt about one thing: this play's not observing any classical unities. So much the worse for van der Valk.

The sunshine was making him sleepy and he yawned hugely getting out of his auto at the police parking lot. He was about to be rudely awakened by Chief Inspector Kan in a great state. Damn it, some important personage's Buick, a thing as long as a bus, had been stolen right here just outside the headquarters building while the owner was inside making a very strongly worded complaint about jewellery being pinched out of his hotel room. He, Kan, would worry about the auto; he was sure he knew all about that. He, van der Valk, would please see about this jewellery straight away because this was a very important personage and there had already been the Swiss Consul on the line and there would be the Swiss Embassy any second now.

Van der Valk sighed heavily and trudged off. His play would have to wait; weeks, quite possibly.

Eleven

Mr Samson was back, offensively brown, bringing as it were a flavour of fish-scales and seawater into the smell of paper. The old man – it was one of his most likeable characteristics – detested paper, and had a strong dislike of all written reports. “I’ve done too many of those things myself not to know all the wangles that can be worked in,” he would say often. “Verbal report, please.” Administrative peccadilloes did not worry him, but his cross-questioning had a way of uncovering carelessness or downright stupidity that could be cunningly masked by the adroit bureaucratic phrase that pleased all magistrates no end. Even Mr Samson could not stem the tide, of course. Van der Valk had once worked out that in a week by no means out of the ordinary he had spent fifty-eight per cent of his time writing reports (a stopwatch on his desk and a neat tabulated column of figures on the back of a memorandum about misuse of official stationery).

“Well,” to van der Valk after some ominous grunting about the jewellery and the Buick, though both had been recovered, “what’s been happening about your doctor?” He had to collect his mind. Really he had not given it much thought these last few days. It had almost been a holiday occupation; something to do while business was slack. A crossword puzzle? No, not that. The crossword mentality, adopted by many policemen he knew, who prided themselves on being ‘objective’, was a fatal temptation. No, a play. That was as bad. Maybe it was worse.

“I think, really, there isn’t a lot we can do. The more I poked about the more of a hornets’ nest I uncovered. I got a certain distance bluffing people with talk, but I can’t get any further.”

Did Mr Samson have a very faint grin somewhere under his nose? Van der Valk…the best talker in the regiment.

“I’ve talked to the doctor twice. He’s very tense about something: I don’t know whether he’s nervous of me or not. He might have knocked off this painter, sure, and he might be a lot more bothered at my poking about in a story where all the characters are interconnected in a bloody funny way. The painter turns out to have known a girl who is the daughter by a first marriage of this banker’s wife who was the doctor’s mistress. And he met her, got to know her, in a circle where this doctor’s wife is also a well-known figure. There is also a sort of coolness between wife and doctor. All a mess.”

“You aren’t clear.”

“No more am I.”

“You aren’t thinking that the doctor’s wife may have been

blackmailed too?"

"No, I don't, but anything is possible. The joker in the pack seems to be a sort of playboy art-dealer who knew the painter and even found him dead. Has a tale to cover that, not provable, not disprovable. This playboy knows the doctor's wife, who is a shining light in these artistic intellectual circles, and also knew the painter's girl, the other woman's daughter. He tried to gloss over that fact. I didn't like him, but I've got nothing whatever on him either."

"So you're stuck."

"Yes. I'd got that far when this Swiss lark began, and I didn't like it then and don't now. This art boy is a type that is not above turning a profit out of anything. Blackmail idea may have come from him. He is in a good position. He knows the painter, knows – we don't know how well – the doctor's wife, knows – equally – the girl who is the daughter of the doctor's mistress. Now all of a sudden we find this girl in the company of our painter deceased-but-not-greatly-regretted. They may have been introduced by the art boy, but the wife was also present. She may have done it, or the idea may have come from her. We don't know what knowledge to impute to her. Assume she has none at all and it sounds queer. Wife present at introduction of mistress' daughter to man who is, coincidentally, blackmailing mistress' husband and possibly – we've no proof or even a hint – her own husband. Impute any knowledge of her husband's goings on to her and it smells even worse."

"You mean that knowing or guessing she arranges a situation out of malice?"

"She might not know about any blackmail. She might have known about the mistress and tried to attack her through the daughter. This painter had a reputation for collecting young girls. On the other hand she knew this art-dealing smoothie, whom the painter had known previously, antecedent to all this. She may have given some grounds for blackmail herself. The painter may have been screwing on two separate married couples and been suppressed by any of them, as well as this boyfriend who – it just so happens – found his body, in the flat above the house occupied by the doctor and his wife."

Mr Samson was sniffing and twisting his nose discontentedly. "Sounds all very staged, this. Very melodramatic. Very artificial."

"Exactly what I thought. As though it had all been rigged expressly to throw dust in our eyes. And we haven't a damn thing on any of these people. Not even the art boy. He told me a couple of harmless lies and so what?"

"So your wish, conclusion, deduction – ha – would be to

withdraw."

"We've had absolutely nothing but a sort of backstairs accusation from this banker. I could, I think, show him now that he might be well advised to drop it. His wife was badly frightened and so was the doctor. There's grounds for nothing at all but one of these old-fashioned ways of getting back at the fellow that's been sleeping with your wife – alienation of affection, or criminal conversation, or whatever it's called. And this banker would never make a formal complaint; he's not opposed to press publicity, oh no, not much."

"Baldly, then, you're advising against any further action of any kind, since you don't know what you might start, and you don't know where it might not stop."

"Yes."

"You called this young fellow, this art-dealer, who according to you is slightly objectionable in a harmless way, the joker in the pack. You don't like him. You even think him capable of blackmail himself." Mr Samson was speaking very heavily and laboriously, with puffs of cigar-smoke between each phrase. He reminded his subordinate of an old rusty French steam locomotive that is perfectly capable still, when the mood takes it, of hauling a night express at a hundred miles an hour the whole way from Paris to Bordeaux. One sees them groaning and complaining horribly, bunting an endless line of stubby goods wagons across the points of suburban marshalling yards. Suddenly he accelerated with loud puffs.

"I see this girl more as the joker myself. This daughter. How old is she?"

"Sixteen." Van der Valk was greatly surprised.

"Sixteen. Uh. What does she know or guess or imagine, what mayn't she say or do, what mightn't she let out? Have you talked to her?"

"No," stupidly, still astonished.

"Well why not? If there's anything at all in all this she's the key figure."

"I've only just found out her identity. By accident, picking up a little background on this painter, I heard this girl mentioned. Unprompted patter by other people. Then the art boy didn't want to give me her name. When I did hear it I was struck, but I didn't see how I could approach a girl of that age."

"But you agree that it's possible that she might have played a part in contriving this stagy set of circumstances. Suppose, for example, that she learned something about her mother, mightn't she then have approached the doctor's wife?"

“Anything is possible. Even a damn queer conspiracy. It’s a family affair. We know about family affairs, huh – and the way the more one finds out the more one becomes involved in things nobody can understand.”

“Yes,” said Samson slowly. “Pity the policeman who arrests an old woman in a village accused of killing her husband with weed-killer.”

“We might not,” said van der Valk, “be far off that right now.”

There was a long sullen silence. Just so does the engine in the marshalling yard collapse into lengthy immobility, for no reason any outsider can see. Dead stillness. Outside the window a whole crowd of Amsterdamse sparrows chattered and gibbered in a tree. Sun, warm and cheerful, giving again that holiday illusion, poured down.

“I want to talk to this girl myself.” Another unexpected burst of activity from the old engine. “I’m not going to decide whether or not to let you go any further into this till I have seen her. I’ll send a polite note. No question of any interrogatory summons or anything judicial. A polite impersonal form. Where’s my idiot boy? Blom… Blom, get a form, the one that says please present yourself with a date and time. Not the one saying failure to comply is punishable. In my name, here to this room. Van der Valk, you give him the address, and I’ll want you here when she comes, to take notes.”

“Leave out Motive,” said Van der Valk. “Leave out Commissaris and leave out Criminal Branch. Just put Room Twenty-five.”

The secretary, who was not a real secretary at all, but a trainee inspector learning administrative routine, put the form in one of those brown envelopes with ‘Service’ printed on them and a transparent panel in the front. Van der Valk, who was watching, put a hand out, removed the envelope and handed it back; the boy looked puzzled.

“Look,” patiently. “You get one of those in the post and anybody that sees it knows what it is. Which is sometimes a good thing and sometimes bad and most times indifferent. This time it is a good idea to avoid publicity. Take a plain white envelope, address it by hand, and trot out for a fifteen-cent stamp, there’s a good boy.”

Twelve

The form was sufficiently minatory not to be disregarded. ‘You are politely requested,’ it ran in officialese, ‘to present yourself at Police Headquarters, Amsterdam. Please observe strict punctuality to the time mentioned hereunder. This form should be handed to the concierge on arrival.’ The concierge had been tipped off.

Van der Valk, sitting at the secretary’s table, was struck by Suzanne’s clothes. There is a lot of difference between a sixteen-year-old wearing blue jeans and a rebellious look and the same sixteen-year-old in a summer frock with stockings on and white high-heeled sandals, and Suzanne was carefully composed. She looked quite calm, was alone, and had appeared on the dot. The face was pretty, young and round. She behaved simply as though called up to the headmaster’s office. Van der Valk was curious to see how Mr Samson, who had an old-fashioned earthiness about his way with the public, would handle this girl.

The old man was going through some mail, which he shuffled into a pile and pushed aside.

“Good morning,” he said casually. “Sit down then, Miss Wilde.” He picked up a neglected cigar and drew on it a couple of times to get it going. There was a sputtering noise and a redhot fragment flew off, which the old man killed with a thick finger, wiping the cinders off carefully with someone’s envelope. Fifth of November, thought van der Valk. Or, as the French put it, fires of artifice…

“Let me explain why I asked you to come and see me,” began Samson quietly. “You probably, in common with most of the public, think of the police as concerned with nothing but crime, and if the average person gets a summons to the bureau, he starts examining his conscience and wondering what he’s been caught at. Eh?”

“Well, I did wonder…”

“There you are, you see. Nobody ever thinks that our function is always first and foremost to protect the public. And of course a good deal of that is the prevention of what is loosely called crime. Beginning with the local district police who pick up somebody who drives while drunk and lock him up for the night. That sort of thing has nothing to do with us, here. If, however, they come across an involved tale, they call me, because they haven’t the time to spend on unwinding complicated stories. You might call this the department of involved stories, that may or may not have anything to do with crime but do involve the protection of the public. Eh? I don’t suppose you’ve ever had anything to do with the police and that’s why I’m

telling you this. Eh?"

All this paternalism seemed to be having the desired effect: the girl sat quietly and with relaxed muscles.

"Very good. These complicated stories drag in all sorts of people, whom we have to pester because they may have heard or known something that helps us to understand. People quite uninvolved in anything disgraceful. Clear so far? Good. Happens that a man died recently, and there are some surrounding incidental circumstances we aren't altogether happy about. They may all have a perfectly simple natural explanation and that's why we're trying to meet all the people who knew him, even slightly, and listen to anything however trivial or irrelevant they may be able to tell us. This man was a painter called Cabestan."

Watching the face that he could see in profile van der Valk could not see anything beyond an increase in attention, perhaps. It was nothing more than the face of a girl practically of student age who is accustomed to concentrating on spoken words. To her, Mr Samson appeared no more intimidating or important than her professor of Formal Design.

"You are an art student as I understand, Miss Wilde?"

"Yes."

"You go to a special school, where you learn languages and history and all the usual things, but with less emphasis on maths and physics and so on but special courses in the development of art or whatnot – is that all correct?"

"Yes." Her voice was small and shy, but apart from that she gave a poised, even an assured impression. She looked older than sixteen. One would have said eighteen, nineteen. Of course these girls wear much more sophisticated clothes than they used to. They have their hair done professionally, they study their make-up carefully and they have all that carefully cultivated air of worldly wisdom. Not really surprising, since these schools are forcing-grounds of their development.

"Was it through this artistic atmosphere that you met Mr Cabestan?"

"No – well, I should say not exactly."

"Can you tell me how it was?"

"We have an art appreciation class, you see, and we often get sent or taken to exhibitions. At one of these we were in a group with Dr Geyl, who's one of our professors, and he introduced us to a lady who was there who knew him, and she was talking to me, and because of something she said – I don't know how to explain – she took me to a

house…"

"Apropos?"

"Yes, that's it, apropos, well, a house where there were some pictures and I met Mr Cabestan there."

Never thought to see the old man being so patiently gradual, van der Valk told himself. Learn something new each day.

"The lady is called?"

"Mrs van der Post. She knows an awful lot of painters and dealers and – oh, everybody."

"The house belongs to her?"

"No, a sort of dealer – present day stuff. A Mr Simons. Well – "in rather a hurry – "Mr Cabestan was there and he was making jokes about a picture they all thought good and he said was no good. And he asked me more or less as a joke whether I thought it good, but I wanted to be serious and I said no, to be honest, I couldn't see it, and he laughed like anything and told me I had good taste. Mr Simons was rude and said he was about as far behind modern taste as Ary Scheffer – Mr Cabestan I mean. I rather liked him. And then Mr Simons gave us a drink and said I had a lot to learn and I shouldn't listen too much to Dr Geyl and – ach – it just happened I got to know him so. I can't really explain any more."

"You don't have to," said Samson composedly. "That's perfectly clear and reasonable. So you saw a bit of Mr Cabestan from then on."

"Oh yes, he took me to a few places, and to see his own work, and was always amusing and funny, though I thought, to be honest, he talked awful nonsense about most things."

"Um. And do you think he was just anxious to teach you about art?"

She laughed. Without affectation, perfectly naturally.

"Of course not. Oh, he talked about art all day, but he wanted to make love to me, of course. He was always trying to get me to pose for him."

This directness in the rising generation disconcerted the old man a bit and van der Valk had to grin.

"In the nude?" he said a bit awkwardly.

"What else? I didn't, naturally. But I liked him in an odd way. He was a poor old fellow – nobody took him very seriously, I could see, but he had nice sides too. I thought he was even a pretty good painter once. He drank too much."

"And did you ever meet Mrs Post again?"

"Yes, outside his house: I was there three or four times. He used to

get amorous but I used to sort of shake him loose. Later I found she lived there, downstairs I mean, it's a big house. She said hallo very nicely and asked me to have coffee with her in town. And I met her once at a party."

"Did Mrs Post know Casimir? I mean she obviously knew him but was there a closer acquaintance?"

She laughed again clearly.

"He couldn't stick her. He called her the art whore. That was just spitefulness of course because she despised his work."

"You liked her yourself, though?"

"Like, like, I don't know her well enough: she was always polite and nice to me, like I say," a little impatiently, as though she found the old man a wee bit obtuse.

"She knew that you were friendly, or acquainted, with Cabestan, at least?"

"Oh yes, of course. There wasn't any secret about it."

"So your parents knew it as well."

Not quite so obtuse…first tiny sign of hesitancy and confusion in the girl's manner. Van der Valk, quietly writing shorthand, could see her very well.

"Now…to be honest, no. I mean they're very reasonable about letting me go where I please and meet whom I choose, especially when it's anything to do with work, but – well, it's a question of tact really. I mean if I'd mentioned Casimir at home there might have been a flap and questions and it might have led to a row and I just prefer to avoid that."

"That's quite natural." It was decidedly the first time van der Valk had ever known the old man being silky.

"Would both your parents have been inclined to disapprove?"

"Perhaps," she said carefully. "My father's more strict but he has to be because he's very well known, you see. My mother wouldn't really have minded much but she'd back him up, if you understand."

"But you find it reasonable that she should back him up, eh?"

"A wife ought to back her husband up," immediately, decidedly.

"Have you ever met Dr Post?"

Again a hesitation and this time tension. Slight; only noticeable because her answers had been coming so easily and loosely.

"Well – met isn't quite the word. He treated me a couple of months ago for anaemia."

"I thought he was a neurologist."

"I don't know. My mother says he's a good doctor. He certainly

cured me."

"Ah, your mother suggested it. I don't know why, I thought perhaps Mrs Post had suggested your consulting her husband."

"No, no," emphatically. "She knew nothing about it."

"She never introduced you to her husband?"

"I'd never seen him. I supposed he wasn't interested in pictures. That's to say I'd never thought about it."

"Um. You know Mrs Post and your mother knows Dr Post but your paths just hadn't crossed, uh?"

She just looked a little puzzled.

"I don't think my mother knows him all that well. She'd consulted him one time, she told me and I suppose she found him good."

"Exactly. Now this Mr Simons; did you ever meet him again?"

She was going to balk; he could see it. Mr Samson lit another of his terrible cigars: van der Valk got a cigarette out one-handed, awkwardly.

"You are pretty inquisitive about all my doings, aren't you?"

"But that's our work, you see. Just like painting pictures, or building a wall, come to that," poking with his burnt match-point to get a better draught in the horrible thing.

"Can't you tell me what it's all about, then?"

"I may," said Mr Samson briefly. "We'd got to Mr Simons."

"I met him a couple more times. You know how it is – you get into a sort of group."

"You've been to his house again?"

"I don't know who can have told you that."

"Nobody told me; that's why I ask."

"A couple of times, yes."

"When was it that you heard Cabestan was dead?"

"I hadn't heard anything of him in a while and I supposed he'd just got tired of trying to make me. A couple of the boys told me he was dead. It was a shock because – ja, it always is, isn't it? – I mean hearing someone is dead. I mean one knows people die, of course, but you don't expect people you know ever to die. But I wasn't terribly surprised because I knew he wasn't well. He drank much too much, and he used to go a funny colour and breathe heavily, after climbing all those stairs."

"You said a couple of the boys."

"Yes, at school, but not the same class. They heard at the arts club, they said. Casimir used to go there. He took me once but I didn't care for it – all that unwashed crowd of pseudos."

Mr Samson, beginning to look more recognisable to van der Valk now, made another of his swerves.

"Did your mother know you had met Mrs Post? You would have had no especial reason to be tactful about meeting her, I take it?"

"Well, I suppose not, but I don't think I ever mentioned it; I suppose it just never came up," lamely.

"I see… Did you know that Simons found Cabestan dead?"

"I haven't seen Mr Simons in quite a while," very cold.

"But you knew the two were friends?"

"I don't know anything of the sort. I don't think they were friends."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know… Casimir never talked about him as a friend – not to me, anyhow."

"He talked about him, then?"

"Oh well…because we'd met at his house… I really hardly know Mr Simons."

"I get the impression – correct me if I'm wrong – that Mr Simons is not a pleasant subject of thought to you."

"I don't care for him much."

"Had he ever made any advance towards you?"

"No." She blushed. She hadn't blushed at Cabestan's advances being mentioned.

"Cabestan and Simons hadn't, perhaps, had a disagreement - maybe about you?"

"Not that I know of."

"And you wouldn't know why Simons went to Cabestan's house, on the occasion he found him dead?"

"No. Are you thinking someone killed Casimir?" suddenly. Had it really only just struck her?

"Somebody would like us to believe that." His voice was very calm.

"And you think it might have been Harry Simons?" The intonation sounded as though the thought did not displease her. Samson did not answer: he knocked the ash off his cigar.

"You don't think I killed poor old Cas, for heavens' sake?"

"You'd prefer we thought it was Simons, no doubt," without irony. She wriggled, disconcerted. She was looking a lot more her age, now.

"Mr Cabestan," he said, dry, "had been blackmailing your father. Demanding money from him on the strength of a pretended secret that would cause your father great embarrassment if it were to

become public. Any idea what that would be?" She went flaming scarlet.

"My father knows – no, Casimir…"

"Yes, Miss Wilde? You must tell me. This is extremely important. What did your father know?"

"That I…" Freeze. "No – Casimir didn't know," desperately; it was a wail.

"Yes, Miss Wilde?"

She burst into hysterical sobs. Samson made a face at van der Valk, who got up and came back with a glass of water. He put it on the desk; she sent it across the room with a furious slap. Neither policeman paid any notice: Blom-boy, as Mr Samson called him, could mop that up.

"That Cabestan had seduced you, Miss Wilde, I think you want to say."

"No. No. No." Mounting inflection of passionate emphasis. Van der Valk opened his mouth suddenly wide, got a nasty look from his superior officer, and shut it again hurriedly.

"Van der Valk, make out an official form of interrogatory summons to Harry Simons."

The girl gave a great gulping sob, straightened up and looked at him terrified.

"Harry Simons had seduced you, Miss Wilde." She made an effort and got a nod made. "That was what your father knew?"

"I would like some water."

"Van der Valk."

Sighing slightly, he had to go and get another glass. There wasn't one, but he found a tea-cup.

"I'm sorry if I sound inexorable," said Mr Samson quite kindly. "I do not wish to bully or frighten you. This won't last much longer but we must have these facts. Of course nobody suspects you of anything criminal, not even knowledge. But I must know the truth here. Would you like some more water? Very well, Simons seduced you. Cabestan was jealous, I think."

"No. He didn't know. Not from me, anyhow."

"Good, he didn't know. You encouraged him a little – I see – to help make a break from Simons – no, all right, that doesn't matter for the moment. Ah… Did Simons by any chance become a little jealous of Cabestan? Think maybe that you were too familiar with him? As I have heard, Cabestan had a bad reputation with young girls like yourself, and what you say about telling your parents rather confirms

that you knew that – hm?"

She nodded hesitantly. He thought for a while and then made his mind up.

"Very well, very well. I've no wish at all to seem rough with you, Miss Wilde, and I'm sorry you've had a hard time. It's over now. If you like, there's a washroom along the passage. Thank you very much for coming and for being extremely helpful; you're free of course to go, whenever you like. Show her, van der Valk… By the way, Miss Wilde?"

She turned, dazed still from tears.

"I don't think you'll want to say anything about this at home, will you? Did you mention that you were coming here to see me?"

She shook her head.

"So much the better then. I'll say nothing about it either, then, to your parents. Hm? That console you a little."

"I won't say anything. You mean it, really? You won't tell my father I was here?"

"No I won't. You have my word."

When he got back, Mr Samson was trying to read his shorthand.

"Type this up. I want to read it."

Meekly, he sat down at Blom's typewriter.

Thirteen

Mr Samson read the transcript carefully; van der Valk, with the carbon under his eyes, did the same: there was silence, broken only by the old man's characteristic trick of taking his glasses off, throwing them on the desk with a clatter, staring out of the window, heaving a sigh, and putting the glasses on again.

Van der Valk thought about Mrs van der Post, whom he had never seen. That imbecile De Vries had undeniably had talent. There was something vivid about his ridiculous 'sketch' that could be seen more clearly after listening to the remarks of a teenage girl, more vivid still because she had not only talent, but the perceptive naïveté that opened windows on obscurity as nothing else could have done. He was full of admiration for Samson, who had known this without ever having met any of these persons.

Was it purely coincidence that the frau Post had crystallised the interrelation between these people? If the girl had not met her at a gallery and through her met Simons she would never have met Cabestan. Who had plainly detested the Post woman – the 'art whore'. Had Post himself had any idea of all this? He had treated the girl for anaemia, but had he seen anything in her but the daughter of a woman he knew? His mistress, certainly, but was that important?

Had Casimir seen the girl in or leaving Post's house? Had that given him ideas or suspicions? The girl had been important to him; she gave him, plainly, a new lease of life. And, perhaps, his death.

Simons, obviously, counted for nothing. He might have been used as a pawn by the Post woman. Poor fellow – what a blow to his self-esteem. It was possible that he had known or guessed something of Casimir's manoeuvres. Lalalala – who would ever know who had manoeuvred what and why? If Casimir was attached to the girl, would he really have decided to blackmail her father?

"You don't want this Simons picked up, do you?"

"Of course not; that was a squeeze on the girl. One point in her tale rings false. She was seduced by Simons, who is plainly a sort of professional narcissist spending his life admiring his own magnificence. She learns to detest Simons, and in reaction Cabestan comes to appear to her a likeable person. That is all consequent enough. Then we find her suddenly going to this doctor, to be treated for anaemia. That I don't find consequent. In the same house, though she rather disliked the wife, whom Cabestan, moreover, loathed, and whom she had a grudge against as the person who had mixed her up with Simons."

"The mother…"

"You don't send your daughter for treatment to the man who is or has been your lover," decisively.

"Everybody agrees that whatever his morals he's a good doctor."

"No, no, no. If the mother really sent her there's something behind that. I think she went off her own bat." He took his glasses off again. "The other thing that doesn't satisfy me is the whole attitude Merckel takes up. Look at the chain of events.

"Cabestan learns in some way, possibly through the daughter, who may know or guess – impossible to say whether she was acting when I asked her – that the mother is Post's mistress. He is attached to the girl, but something sours it and his resentment fastens on the whole tribe of Posts. He decides for reasons of his own to put the bite on Merckel. I wonder why.

"Now Merckel has every reason to keep quiet about this, and does in fact keep quiet about it. Cabestan dies. Merckel then comes to us with an absurd tale about a scruple. He accuses Post of killing Cabestan, and he never tells us what grounds he has, since all he has to go on is Cabestan's tale that his wife is Post's mistress, a fact that by his own admission he cared little about, provided she was discreet. He must have had something more to go on. That something is certainly to do with the daughter. You heard her. Her father knows something about her. And you tell me that the wife's evidence was that Merckel is very attached to his step-daughter, having no children of his own."

"But if he found out she had been seduced by Simons how would that rouse him against Post – or Cabestan?"

The old man regarded him with dislike.

"I know nothing. I've never seen any of these people. I have nothing whatever but the girl's words to me, and I'm trying to find a logical explanation for them. Since you apparently haven't had the patience to think about these things I have to do it for you. I see a fact.

"A month or so after the girl has an affair with Simons – call it that for a convenient formula – she goes to Post of all people, to be treated, we are told, for anaemia. I can't swallow that."

Van der Valk, who had swallowed it, was abashed.

"Suppose – suppose – she went there herself, giving possibly some excuse to the mother, and asked Post for an abortion. Thinking possibly that she can twist Post's arm, knowing a few things either from the mother or through Cabestan."

"Even if it were true we'd never prove it. Couldn't use it against

Post without a fearful stink."

"Yes, yes, you don't need to tell me," irritably. "Nobody's proposing to use it or even mention it. But if true it explains what does not at present ring true. Merckel, either from the girl or more likely from Cabestan, finds out something of this. He may even have thought Cabestan the putative father, and that he had sent the girl to Post. In which case they are both birds of a filthy feather, and when Cabestan suddenly dies Merckel concludes that Post has removed an awkward and disagreeable accomplice. And that sticks in his throat. The fellow has attacked him, his wife, and now his daughter, and that goes too far. He comes to us, with hints, but tries to suppress the daughter."

Van der Valk, who had thought Merckel was holding something back, and wondered why the banker should be indifferent to his approaching the wife, was impressed by the old man's grasp of a situation that had baffled him. But was the old man really proposing to do anything about it?

"We can't use this girl as a witness against Post. And we can't begin any legal action. But you've talked to this fellow a couple of times now. You might see whether there was anything that could be built up there. Don't try to intimidate Merckel. All these people are in a position to make life very nasty for us – bear that in mind, lad. Look at all this mess on the floor; where's my Blom-boy?"

Fourteen

Mr Samson would say no more, van der Valk knew. Either now or at any other time. Now it was up to him. If he reported – after a decent interval for mourning – that there was nothing to be done with any of these people, the old man would take the whole file, bury it in a hole eight feet deep, and never mention it again.

There was nothing he could do with Heer Merckel.

There was nothing he could do with Mrs Post, either. He had nothing whatever against her, and the moment he tried to question her she would smell rats. The woman from the powerful family of magistrates, the shining light of intellectual circles, the 'art whore'!

As for Post, he had been right outside his book and his powers from the word go. If Post lifted a finger his job was gone. Post must know this. Why hadn't he complained? Better still, why hadn't he simply thrown van der Valk out?

And yet – what was the streak of fatalism or obstinacy that made him persist? – he didn't give up. Quite the contrary, he phoned for another appointment. Devil take it; how stupid he sounded. Would that secretary really not smell a rat this time?

"I'm afraid," cautiously over the telephone, "my trouble still hasn't cleared up. I would like to see Dr Post again, as soon as it can be managed."

"That's quite all right, Mr van der Valk, I understand. Afternoons still suit you best? Let's see…you could come tomorrow. It's lucky that it's August, you see – very many of our patients are on holiday, and don't want to think about disagreeable things like appointments," sunnily. Her voice was quite innocent – Post could have said nothing to her. No; certainly not.

"Many thanks," he said. "That'll do very well indeed."

Fifteen

"Me again," in a voice stupidly bright, that he would have sworn was not only false but practically falsetto.

"Must be the heat," remarked Dr Post calmly. "Nervous troubles are precipitated by a heatwave; it's a commonplace."

Indeed it was hot; it had gone on and on undiminished. Asphalt stuck to the soles of everybody's shoes, and fat Amsterdamse housewives had given up wearing frocks altogether, and hung out of their windows in slips shiny and violently coloured as lollipops, languidly shaking out their dusters and showing a good deal of unaphrodisiac armpit. The sales of fizzy lemonade had reached such dizzy heights that the factories could not keep supplies up, and did not know whether to laugh fatly at their monstrous profits or cut the phone off to stop the shower of complaints. And the Amsterdamse police force was in trouble too. The uniformed members were hoarse with quacks of protest, because some unusually lunatic city father had decided that with all these tourists about the police had to keep their jackets on. "Shirtsleeves," had run his peroration, "are not only unhygienic and undignified; they are a blot upon our good name in far countries." Dear man. As for the plainclothes troops, they were prey to the most extraordinary fantasies – wasn't this the proof? – such as never would have been entertained in the cloudy drizzles of a maritime climate behaving as it should in August.

Here in Dr Post's consulting-room, however, it was cool and delicious. One was deeply grateful for the solidity of old-fashioned houses, for the thick insect-haunted shade of the lindens outside, that shed a kind of sticky deposit on their patches of pavement, above which spiders clambered up and down their ropes with such charming agility.

Dr van der Post was certainly unaffected by heat. His suit was perfect, his shirt had an elegant sit achieved only by good hand-cutting, his untroubled eyes had their warm smiling sympathy.

"I like the heat, myself," said van der Valk.

"So do I. It is rare, and precious if on that count only."

"Cabestan's flat must be pretty hot on a day like this."

"I dare say."

"I'd be interested to see that flat."

No answer. Post took a cigarette and lit it, weighing a slim lighter in his long well-shaped fingers as though meditating the pros and cons of something.

“What plans do you have for the place? Going to find another artist as tenant?”

Suddenly he got up, surprising van der Valk who was used now to immobility and indifference.

“Come and see for yourself. Satisfy your curiosity. I prefer to hold no secrets from you than to find a legion of spies observing my movements, gossiping with my chauffeur. I wish to put a stop to this itch of yours.”

He walked out into the hall, a tall man moving quietly. Van der Valk followed him to the street, where he took a key-ring from his pocket and stopped to look at the lindens.

“Considerable insect population – I’m quite surprised to see no policemen up there.” He opened the door at the corner and motioned van der Valk to go first. Threadbare stair-carpet, steep steps within narrow walls, flight after flight. A twenty-five watt bulb at each narrow landing. One storey, two storeys, three: a painted deal door. The landing was lit by a skylight, but the big studio had mansard windows as well, and enough day came in for any painter. Curtains were now drawn against the sunlight; stained and faded beige cretonne that had once been yellow. It was hot, stuffy and dusty, but not as much as van der Valk had expected. A spider sat motionless in a corner of the ceiling and a big daddy-long-legs had taken up his post on the curtain rail, but it had not a totally deserted or neglected air.

He realised that someone had swept, even dusted, done something to make it habitable. And had spent time here. Whose was the glass and the bottle of mineral water? Whose was that elegant silk dressing-gown? Not Casimir’s.

“Ah, I see you’ve taken up camping.”

“I did not, you may imagine, wish you pawing about among my possessions without my being there to keep an eye on the performance.”

“Rather pleasant.”

“I have a certain taste for solitude.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed. Doing your own cleaning even – no women allowed up here.” He was looking at books with interest. What was this?

Police work is not a great encouragement to intellectual interests. And van der Valk’s education had been nothing spectacular. But he was in no sense the sheep that looks up and is not fed. More like a goat, that having devoured all the rosebushes in sight gets busy with the neighbours’ vines.

His father had been a carpenter whose hobby was cabinet-making for his own home: by the time he died he had even taught himself marquetry. Going on a three-day trip to Paris he had stood open-mouthed in the Louvre, and for the rest of his life been full of Oeben and Riesener, Leleu, Weisweiler and Molitor, mispronounced but thoroughly understood.

His mother had in her own words 'bookwormed herself through the whole damn public library'. It was not really surprising that he had become the kind of person that cannot pass a book without picking it up.

One of these books struck him because of a coincidence. The author's name was Van der Post! When he picked it up it seemed familiar: yes, about Africa, he remembered it; vivid book, by an expert, just the kind of man he liked. There was a phrase in it that had lodged in his memory too, the way a phrase will after the book is forgotten. Something about the individual – one must learn to work out one's individual problems, and see every other man as an individual, and only when that had been done would it be time to turn to collective thinking, people in groups, people as groups.

He picked up another book, and was straight away curious about it. What was this? Myth? Elves and dwarfs and goblins – did Dr Post have fairy stories by his bed, then? Yet it seemed to be an adult book, somehow. He sat on the divan absorbed for some time, looked up suddenly, and saw Post the other side of the room. He had hung a picture on the wall, and was now standing back tasting the effect.

This doctor lived among objects of perfect taste, in luxury, well away from the smell of cheap shops and ugly objects, sweaty people with shapeless shoes crowded around sale counters. What did he like about this half-sordid, shabby room, with a smell of old sun-heated paint and cheap linoleum and paraffin? A heap of rubbish that someone had looked at and decided was not worth the effort of carting away. What was so attractive about this to this man, who was even sleeping up here on a cheap divan carefully made up. A whimsical fantasy? Was that the way a man acted who had killed the last inhabitant of this draggled flat?

He didn't know. He would have to think about it. And Post was just standing there looking amused. He beat a retreat, hoping he didn't look too disconcerted.

Sixteen

In the street, however, his detachment switched on, like the photo-electric cell that lights the street-lamps at dusk. Certainly, he thought, I must look exceedingly ridiculous. Both there in Post's house, and right here in the street. Like the classic caricature of a German tourist, stopping to gaze at buildings of great antiquity and hideous ugliness with cloud-wrapped piety – he had just caught himself raptly reading a torn poster for an exhibition that had been held a month ago, peeling off the metal pillbox of a public lavatory.

When nearly at home he went into his local bookshop, where several people were standing transfixed, tasting the latest pornographic fiction, oblivious to their surroundings. The owner, who knew him well, was leaning on his counter, maliciously studying these sad people.

"Two ballpoints, one red, one green…come on, there are cheaper ones than that… You know a book called *The Lord of the Rings*?"

"Sure. Got it in stock if you want it."

"You have? Let's see… This a best-seller or something?"

"No, no. I buy one at a time and it sells every month: has for years. Specialised appeal. I've read it – a total new world, landscapes, languages, history, all complete. It has all the things people like – war, poetry, kings, castles – and leaves out everything they have to live with. No money, no sex, no commerce, no industry - remarkable, and great power of imagination. It's not like anything else; it's a phenomenon."

Van der Valk stood for three-quarters of an hour, quite as transfixed as the students of pornography. When the bookseller told him so, he was so cross he bought the book.

What was more, he sat up half the night with it. Strange thing for a Dutch policeman. It was English of course; a Frenchman would not write that. But a German would like it too; rustic humour and pastoral verse, many songs and rhymes, mountains full of wizards and romantic horrors, a hero in armour and a pale princess. Just the book for Ludwig of Bavaria but one would hardly have thought for a specialist in women and neurology.

The author had a strange name, not very English sounding. Tolkien. That could almost be a Dutch name. Which was remarkable.

The national character, he thought vaguely, is a thing about which a lot of nonsense is spoken and believed. They are very proud of what they call 'sobriety' – spoken of as the national virtue daily. Looking at both-sides-of-the-penny, down-to-earth, you-can't-fool-me.

Determined to see what is, and to detect, and abolish, what only might be. It leads to a hateful caution, a loathing of imagination, a fear of fantasy. If hypocrisy is the English vice, and vanity the French vice, and obedience the German vice, then surely sobriety is the Dutch vice.

It was four in the morning. His wife had gone to bed indignant with him. It couldn't be helped.

'Tolk' in Dutch means an interpreter. 'Ien' is a diminutive. Had the man or his ancestors gone to England? That other Van der Post, the African one – his grandfather had run away too, from Holland.

Why did the doctor go and live in the top-floor studio where poor old Cabestan had been a failed painter? Was this doctor a bit of a failed poet? Being a successful doctor might be a strain on the man? Why had he married the woman from the family of magistrates, with artistic tastes? That first pressing of the grapes of a bourgeois nation, where all the aristocracy and all the tramps had been most carefully, conscientiously throttled, years and years ago. Did he deliberately choose and seduce women from the same background? With his head full of dwarfs and goblins, he took a long while getting to sleep.

A police department is a rigid hierarchy, like any other civil service branch. Van der Valk, an inspector, was a captain. Under him came a crew of noncommissioned officers and simple soldiers, who had been given a special training to raise them above the common ruck of police duties, which have never been described better than they were by Fouché a hundred and fifty years ago. Whores, thieves, and street-lamps.

Van der Valk disliked the rigidity of the hierarchy. To take an example, the 'filature' or throwing of a net of policemen around any individual whose habits and movements one may wish to study. It is entrusted automatically to flatfeet, whereas, he thought, it is very difficult and delicate. However, this time he could do it himself – he had to do it himself – in his own time at that. Not only was Dr van der Post not official business but he was on the lookout for insects in the linden trees.

Seventeen

He had been wondering for some time where he had seen the man before. The dandified narrow suits, the long elegant hands, the delicate gesture pushing the handkerchief up the sleeve to avoid any wrinkles or bulge in the jacket. He was familiar from somewhere with that long neat head, the stiff hair cut short with what would be a fringe were it not suddenly combed sideways to present a level untroubled forehead; the eyes perceptive and melancholy, the wide mouth with its perpetual mocking smile, the large well-modelled ears.

It was easy. Once a week the doctor went to a sort of athletic club which went in for less popular, almost snobbish sports. Fencing, badminton, squash. Some of the judo boys trained here, and a few of the physical-fitness fiends who went in for the formal balletic rituals of gymnastics. It was a nice place, with a tiny twenty-metre pool such as one finds in a turkish bath, and one heard the sporting gossip of Europe there. The subscriptions were high but van der Valk did not mind; one got to know all sorts of amusing people. He was no earthly good at games, but was active and supple enough to play most with enjoyment, and it was nice after sitting cramped over some thirty-page pomposity of a report all afternoon to box a bit and then go headlong into the little pool, legs anyhow, and come out with a villainous thrash that the back-stroke champion, a friend, called the 'Harbour-Police-Special'.

But he had hardly noticed the doctor, and the doctor had certainly never noticed him, because Post belonged to the club's exclusive, fastidious clique, that had a special room with proper lockers. A few other specialist doctors and lawyers, a brace of high municipal executives, a Consul and a concert singer… They did not dream of playing with riffraff like businessmen or television stars. Squash was their game. Dr Post was rather good, with venomous shots coming back at totally unexpected angles, and that spectacular service that trickles meanly back along the ceiling and the wall behind, where one can never get a fair swing at it…

Even now he did not notice van der Valk, though that gentleman put himself more and more impudently in full view. The 'Heavy Mob' went for a swim in the pool that was kept a whole hour for them on 'their' evening, reappeared beautifully dressed for a ceremonious whisky at the bar, and left soon afterwards, Dr Post still unconscious, apparently, of the police presence that had been drinking whisky at his very elbow.

Dr Post was also a concert-goer. Van der Valk found himself at five in two weeks on this account. He knew nothing about music, except from Arlette's gramophone, and her taste was personal and cranky, with a tendency to dislike all sopranos. He enjoyed himself now very much, discovered Bruckner, and was very taken with a Hungarian whose name he could not capture and who did the eighth symphony of Dvorák, which he was delighted with. When he told Arlette about it she was, typically, sniffy about 'Czech folklore' and he was indignant. There was, too, a wonderful American negress who did a Schumann group, a snobbish visiting conductor who did messy Mozart and got clapped furiously for it (to the disgust, he was glad to see through a little glass, of Dr Post, alone and austere among the abonnés) and a splendid German woman, quiet and gentle-looking, but who played the violin with such love that he became quite converted to Bach sonatas that he had always thought of as very dull.

No, he did not think there was anything puritanical about the doctor. The lecherous puritan is a common enough phenomenon in Holland, but Post was more as well as more complex. He was a lover of sensuous delights, of civilised and luxurious arts, of pure pleasure. That bathroom of his jarred; it was too much the ostentatious vulgarity of a very expensive hotel. That was to tell him, surely, and quite openly, that Post was a collector of women the way he might have been of Sèvres china. Mrs Merckel was not the only one: he would make a little bet on that.

Mrs Beatrix van der Post had some connection with it, he felt. He had seen her by now: meditating on the luscious summer evenings under the lindens he had had plenty of chances of studying Madam. For the movements of both were predictable, since they belonged to the chauffeured stratum of society. Not that this chauffeur was the figure of caricature that stands stiffly saluting outside the marble portal of a Rolls-Royce, but he brought the Alfa Romeo round to the front on evenings when Dr Post was going out – and drove it too, for Post either could not drive or greatly disliked driving. And he brought Madam's little auto round every evening, because she always went out. It was a trim white BMW, pretty little object, and it fitted her like one of her elegant long white gloves. She had a trick of standing by it surveying her house and herself with satisfaction before climbing in, which she did well, with no display of stockings.

Trim was the word for her too. She had a solid Dutch figure, but she appeared slim in her excellent choice of clothes. A neatly rounded body, by no means unattractive, a keen, intelligent face with a high forehead and a sharp nose a scrap too big but well shaped, strong neat legs unbowed or bulged, with clean ankles and long

shinbones.

Yet van der Valk had no difficulty in seeing just what Cabestan had meant. Or why the girl Suzanne had never felt quite happy with this friendly, pleasant, kind woman. Or why Dr Post had no great interest in pictures, perhaps. The art whore, he suspected, looked at everything with the same self-satisfaction. With the same superiority, even. Her house, her clothes, her excellently composed body and ordered mind, her gleaming auto and gleaming driving style – she was an excellent driver. And her picture, her television programme: and of course her artist and her producer. Everything she touched she would manage and arrange – and always so extremely well…

Once or twice, for the hell of it, he followed at a discreet distance, and watched her getting out of the little white car as gracefully as she got in. What would that be like in bed? he asked himself. He drew himself pictures of her undressing, but they were not erotic pictures. Mrs Beatrix van der Post-Rouwé was not an erotic woman. No, these hours in the street weren't wasted; far from it.

It didn't do to draw conclusions from such things, but he was making pictures – or more accurately tentatively nervous scribbles - during these evenings. Post was plainly a kind of person that is not uncommon: the classic highly strung type, that likes and needs a quiet simple existence. Regular food, regular exercise, a lot of sleep. They have no great sexual capacity; he would have thought that a collection of women was more likely to be imaginary than real. They have a feeling of suspected inadequacy, no? Perhaps. Draw no conclusions. But the man was rather like Casimir, wasn't he? That same air of promise that had come to little. Had he looked at the other man, and seen a vision rather like his own future, and hated it rather? How would he react, van der Valk asked himself suddenly, if I were to invite him to meet me personally? For a game of squash, say? Get away from being policeman and doctor. In that consulting-room I'll never reach him; he's too armoured. But on my ground - outside…?

Suppose I were to point out to him, over a drink or something, this similarity. The withdrawal from the world, the observation from a high vantage point, the need for girls and reliance on them – for wasn't that the one real contact with life they both had? Might it stir him up?

There was nothing else he could do. Dr Post was sitting pretty. All he had to do was stay quiet another week and van der Valk would have made a brief, impersonal report to Mr Samson that there was nothing to be done. A formally worded little letter would have gone

off to Mr Merckel. And that would be that.

He gave Dr Post a telephone call, and made his invitation. And was surprised. He thought it would be pushed aside, politely. It was accepted. What ailed the fellow?

Part Two

One

Why have I chosen to write this, to put it all on paper; even, on occasion, my own words in dialogue form? I could call it an exercise in detachment, a formal method – for studying this chain of circumstances. There is no ground for doing so. I have the requisite objectivity and – I do not need to go to such pains in order to reassure myself. Nor is this a casebook for others. I have no desire for immortality in the dusty clinical files of the Faculty Library, to be used for the edification of dim students.

But perhaps for one pair of eyes? Can I trust him? I can, I believe, for even if his blessed regulations compel him to communicate all such findings to the legal authorities, he will not do that, if I have understood him. He is capable of illegality – as I am.

I will emphasise that this is a dialogue. Or I should say rather a conversation between us – you see, I can address you directly, now that I have decided. If you read these pages, it will be because you have understood, and will be capable of understanding better. That is why I have put in fragments of conversations that have passed between us. Listen to my words again, and put them together with the words I have added. I have said, 'If you ever read this'. That will be when you have obtained formal proof against me. You will have realised, at the same time, that formal proof was not enough. For lawyers, yes, but not, I think, for you.

I am not a psychopath and have no compulsion to do dangerous things, court risks, bring about my own downfall. I have no hunger to confess, to be caught. You are trying to exert pressure upon me, but you have no lever of compulsion. No, it will be because you have built up, patiently, step by step, a chain of circumstantial witness. You will find it very difficult. (I am speaking of all this in the future tense still; it has not yet happened, after all. Perhaps it never will? No, I told you I possessed detachment. I have also courage, honesty, and the ability to resist self-deception. You will arrive.)

You will find it discouraging. But behind the mass of silence and deception, you will winkle out scraps of real evidence. It is there after all, and it will point to me in the end.

To prove to you that I have foresight, that I am not even worried, I will show you that I have thought of everything. Full proof will be lacking, inevitably. You will construct a rigmarole of minor charges. I will have an expensive, skilful advocate, a lot of money, a great deal of patience. I may not secure acquittal – and I do not greatly care if I do not, for I will not waste a lot of time. A year in prison, with time

deducted for waiting to come to trial, and of course the full deduction for good behaviour. I shall be very well behaved.

But then? After? That, you are thinking, will be the worst part. The disgrace, the broken career, the pointing finger, the whisper behind the fat soft knuckles. My dear fellow, not a bit. It would not alarm me to be deprived, even permanently, of my licence to practise medicine. I am a good doctor. Nobody can take away my skill and experience. You wonder what I will do? I am a handy electrical craftsman, and quite complex gadgets are within my scope. I could find interesting and well-paid work. And of course in many countries I could simply set up as a quack. The word does not alarm me. I have known quacks of a great deal more use to their patients than most doctors that are officially recognised. Nor am I alarmed about social position – 'standing'.

But let us get back to our conversation. Our criminal conversation. The phrase amuses me. It is the kind of phrase I will find in the list of charges read against me. Is it a criminal charge, or only civil? Does it even still exist on the statute book? I hope so; I find it amusing. There will be other trifling things, no doubt. Illegal possession of drugs not accounted for, or some other tedious and laboured phrase.

This conversation of ours will never be mentioned in any court. In reading it, you will have observed that you cannot show it to anyone without compromising yourself and your career, which is no doubt precious to you. You will not hold this against me, if you are the man I take you for. You are given to unguarded remarks, Mr van der Valk. Even indiscreet. The kind of thing that journalists call, still, 'off the cuff'. All journalists, of course, cling like limpets to the coarse cliché, but have you noticed how old-fashioned journalese often sounds? Who, in the last thirty years, has worn starched cuffs?

This will make a bulky manuscript. You will get practice in deciphering my handwriting, with its scribbles and its jumps, its clarity and precision, and the personal abbreviations all doctors use. We are accustomed from our earliest student days to large quantities of notes, which to be any use at all must be full, clear, and perfectly comprehensible, however much haste was used in taking them down. It is no hardship to me to write at this length. When I was a student my notes were constantly borrowed by the others. Every night I wrote them up religiously from the day's roughs on scratch paper, into the series of big loose-leaf volumes. It was my greatest pleasure in student days. How I loved – and still do – a large, new, loose-leaf notebook. With what pleasure I watched it fill. There, if you like, is one of the answers to your question – why all this? It is a pleasure.

I know what you will say, of course. You will say – it is one of the axioms at the police school, no doubt – The characteristic, overriding, never-failing mark of the criminal, by which he can always be recognised, is his immense vanity.'

Very likely they are right. And has the writer, too, no vanity? Are not all his characters reflections of himself? Are not his books a measure of his exhibitionism? You have yourself, my dear van der Valk, considerable vanity.

So there I am now, an hour's work or more already, scribbling away happily. It will all have quite a smell of Monsieur Simenon. Yes indeed, I read him too; so do you, no doubt. Don't we all? Of course the man is simply a good doctor. Indeed his nostalgia for his other vocation shows through constantly. But I am not copying his technique, though I recall a book of his presenting a similar situation – you remember 'Letter to my Judge? – by a doctor! But there is no resemblance, I am afraid, between M. Simenon's imaginary awkward rustic in a French provincial town and my very real self – from a background quite aristocratic – in the city of Amsterdam.

I recall the book very well. It was an appeal, for the man had been tried and condemned; nobody had understood and he could not bear that. He chose as the object of his letter the only man who, he thought, had made a serious effort to comprehend – the judge who had drawn up the instruction in his case.

You see how the parallel fails? You cannot, my dear chap, see me doing that. *Pas si bête.* As for understanding – everything, not just barely enough – I don't care a damn whether you do or not. I'm not appealing to you. Understand *that,* at least.

Two

I paused at that last sentence, I remember – this is a day or so later – for I found myself slipping into a sort of meditation about the kind of life I would lead once released from prison. I shall be able to gain a good living, I have told you. I shall keep up my studies in prison, and develop my knowledge of electronics. They are so humane and conscientious, and of course bothered by having educated men as their guests: they will certainly give me every opportunity for study. But my private life? You have seen me, always known me, in this large, luxuriously fitted and furnished house. A solid comfortable house. I am surrounded by comforts, stuffed with bourgeois ornament, including my dear wife. Well, my friend, I shall whisper to you a little secret. You recall my mentioning the psychopath's longing to be caught, to confess? And my assured denial that such was my case? Aha, you thought. No, no, my friend, I shall be quite glad to be caught, but only because it is the only really secure way, short of killing her of course, of getting rid of my dear wife. I do not think I would be able to kill her. She would, I am afraid, catch me out in the attempt.

But the comfort of my life – will you be surprised to hear that I am well able to part with all that? Didn't I say that I was detached - and I interpret the word in its strict sense. I do not hold fast to any material thing. I enjoy them, often, but I sit very loose to my possessions, my encumbrances. I have for long hankered for the life of a student again, living alone in a single room, simply furnished. I shall be one of those elderly bachelors, cooking their meals on a gas ring and reading while they eat. Indeed to read while I eat, alone, in leisure, with no damned table-talk, has always been one of my dearly loved pleasures. Another has been to sit, while everybody was dashing about surrounded by bustle, by noise, in a dim, quiet room, listening to the rain outside the window – or on the zinc roof over a window – beating; trickling. That is pleasure for you. I shall have a life, in fact, rather similar to Cabestan's – or, rather, to the life he could have had, with any sense.

Yes, I killed him. And you will say – no, you will not, perhaps, but the prosecutor will – What sort of a doctor is this, Mr President, who showed such callous, elementary disregard for human life?'

The answer will become apparent to you – if it has not already. He should not, of course, have tried to blackmail me. That was treading on a banana skin: he ran out of time extremely suddenly then. Ill on Thursday, worse on Friday, died on Saturday. Solomon Grundy

would have been a good name for Cabestan.

I shall not bother you, my dear van der Valk, with a technical description. There are so many ways a doctor can cause death with no pain, leaving no trace. He did not suffer. I am reminded of a ridiculous English criminal prosecution – do you recall that rather pathetic doctor, who resembled a figment of M. Simenon's imagination a good deal more than I do, who was accused of murdering an ancient widow with overdoses of heroin? She was in even worse shape than Cabestan, for she was bedridden and practically gaga. The idea was so stupid, so clumsy, such a waste of time – shall we say as much of all three as the trial itself?

Three

I must not lose coherence, and I must avoid all suggestion of the long rambling monologue attempting self-justification. I must put everything in order, for the eye of an 'orderly policeman'. And I must give you a frame of reference. As I promised, I am going to reproduce fragments of our dialogue, which will help you. Another hold upon your discretion, my poor friend! My memory is trained and retentive, and I took rough notes immediately, each time you left me. If you have notes yourself, compare them with this record, and if there is any discrepancy, it is your notes, my friend, that are dishonest. You will see with surprise that I have reproduced your words accurately. Your words! – I have even caught your speech rhythm and your verbal mannerisms…

We are going to go back now, as a starting point, to the day you first came – what word shall I choose? On the whole, 'breezing in' does not convey it badly. Not too aggressive, not too confident, quite nicely mannered, and intelligent enough to be provoking if not alarming. And oh, so very tactful! All your impudence, even the supreme impudence of having yourself announced as a patient, was presented, impudently, as 'tact'. I enjoyed you at once. You were watchful too – a very patient patient.

I am sitting now as I write in my consulting-room, at my bureau, exactly as I was then. To my left the hall, where patients enter and leave – never seeing one another, for that upsets them. You need see nothing sinister in that; any psychiatrist does likewise. Facing me across the room are the doors to my examination-rooms, where I keep the electrical machinery that intrigues you, and to the famous bathroom.

You walked in with a solid step (although you are fairly light on your feet for a biggish man) which I have learned since to recognise. I could see at a glance that you were no patient. What you were took me longer to grasp, yes, but I knew before you told me.

"Good afternoon. Tell me how I can be of service to you."

You began at once with one of your crude jokes.

"My nerves are all right, Doctor, but I do need to be sure I'm not imagining things. I'm in search of the same things as most people - truth, knowledge, reassurance."

"I see. You wish to be reassured, you want knowledge, and you ask for truth. Those things, as you say, are common to most people's wishes. Have you anything more precise to tell me? You suspect that you imagine things. Do you hear things? See them? Feel them? But

we had better start at the beginning." I took one of my case sheets. "Your name?"

"Van der Valk, Peter."

"And how old are you?"

"Thirty-eight."

"And your occupation is?"

"Inspector of police, recherche department."

I was, of course, far too well under control to make any reaction you might have hoped for.

"Make yourself comfortable. We have plenty of time; all my initial appointments are for an hour. Smoke if you feel like it. I am going to ask you a few questions to give me the feeling of your trouble."

"Sure," amicably. A rather sat-on blue packet of Gitane cigarettes; you offered me one in a friendly way, which I took.

"Yes, I'll keep you company. A doctor, you know, must not seem chilly or disdainful."

"You establish the rapport."

"Pretentious phrase. I'm not a psychiatrist, you know. If I can help you it will be in a tangible, actual way. Purely mental disturbances are not in my line, but we will see. You have interesting work. At times trying? Irregular hours? A shortage of sleep, sometimes? Interruption of your home life? You are occasionally over-tired?"

"Sounds like a doctor – well, I am a doctor in a way. All that is true but I have no complaints about it. Part of life."

"Excellent. So you feel equal to the demands of your work, in general. And you have no unusual fears or worries, or a feeling of being inadequate?"

"I'll just have to tell you the details." You had realised that I was fencing with you. "What is worrying me, as precisely as I can."

"I am listening attentively."

"By virtue of your profession you're a very discreet man. And so am I. We have a lot in common. Both nerve specialists, you might say. You might agree that most of your work is palliative, not much more. Mine too." You had decided to match the glossy joviality of my manner. I was still amused by you.

"I had never guessed that a police officer would one day call on me in this way," I said, perhaps maliciously.

"That is the point. I haven't come as a police officer in the ordinary way, ringing loudly at the bell with big boots on, giving the girl at the door something to gossip about, embarrassing you from the start. I would like you to appreciate that point. I preferred to try

and create a personal, confidential, amicable atmosphere. Nobody likes the police in their house. I say no more than the truth when I say that I come in much the same spirit as a patient. I am slightly worried, a good deal puzzled, and I hope for your help."

"But my dear Mr van der Valk, you are aware that my consulting time is quite an expensive item. Or are you proposing that I send an account in to the Department of Justice?"

"Why not?" you said, amused by the idea. "Might do them good. They send accounts in to people – demand immediate payment, what's more." I admired your parry and riposte but you had decided to stop the double-talk; it was getting you nowhere.

"Come, Doctor," you said more seriously. "You mustn't be averse to my trying to throw no shadow on your life. I am a reasonable person, and I won't be taking up much of your time."

"I find your approach most sympathetic, but I'm bound to say that I'm quite in the dark still. What is it I can do to help?"

"The approach," you were trying now to stretch my nerves by making me wait for it, "was deliberate. Naturally, since I have come as a private person I have no official standing. You could, of course, refuse to speak to me, be pompous or frigid, stand on your dignity. I am hoping that you will meet me half way, and speak freely."

I wondered whether I was supposed to react to this as to a blackmail effort. It was certainly intended to give that impression. Under that sunny, talkative manner of yours, you are fond of this type of little trap. I did not, of course, fall into it. I leaned back and crossed my legs, and blew smoke across the space between us.

"Various answers to that. First, I am never pompous nor frigid, I hope, with anyone, not even the eccentric, the absurd-sounding, the unbalanced-seeming. I have heard tales far more confused and peculiar than yours: they are a professional commonplace. I might add that my reaction of patience is also professional. I have my human share of impatience with meandering tales of imaginary ills and grievances that waste a doctor's day.

"Second, I never throw anybody out. I used to have a man who made endless threats to kill me. Finally he shot at me across the street when I was getting into my car one day. He'd been released two or three times from psychiatric institutions – the relatives claimed he was quite harmless. I got him fixed up in the end.

"Thirdly, I'm not in the least bothered by policemen; they are just like any other people – no lesser, no greater tendency towards neurosis."

Yes, I knew I was talking too much. But I had, you see, to fortify

my whole position against the stroke I knew was coming.

"Lastly, your tale may be interesting or it may be foolish; I haven't heard it yet. But I will listen attentively, Mr van der Valk. You are, as you tell me, a police officer, and I imagine that this most tortuous approach of yours has some relation to a crime. Some accusation, no doubt. You find me too quick to protest? I am in a very sensitive profession, and we live in a very sensitive land. There are people who feel that a doctor has not listened with sufficient sympathy to tales of self-pity, or who feel that he is insufficiently indulgent towards self-indulgence in alcohol, perhaps, or drugs. What do you suppose is my reaction towards people who come, as they do come, I assure you, to solicit me for narcotics? These people direct at a physician their unbalanced resentments. They make little plots and denunciations, they spread malicious inventions – they are quite safe from pursuit, since what is it but trivial gossip? The physician learns to protect himself against such. No, my friend, nothing you may have to say to me could shock me."

"You won't be surprised" – I had left you no way out now – "to hear that you have been accused of murder."

"Not particularly. I am not a surgeon, thank heaven. It happens to them daily. And of course there still persists the old superstition that anaesthetists are no better than a brood of poisoners. But I haven't had a patient die suddenly in years."

"Not murder by negligence, Dr Post. Nor of a patient. You are accused of wilful homicide of a person known to you. A certain Cabestan."

"Old Cabestan, really? How remarkable. But I can't think who would wish to blame me for his death, poor old chap."

"It's even stronger. You are accused of bringing his death about, of your own active agency, by hitherto undetected means."

"Now that does astonish me, really. I had thought it probable that he had picked up a dose of pneumonia or some such thing that carried him off. He was fairly elderly, somewhat frail, lived alone - such a death, even when sudden, is never very surprising."

We were fencing again. I am not going on: that is enough to remind you how our first conversation went. It was inconclusive. I did not ask you how you had received the accusation, nor who had made it; I had, to begin with, a notion that you wouldn't tell me. But principally my whole attitude had to be that of smiling indifference, to murder or anything else. The world is full of people who make accusations. Policemen at your level got hundreds. I decided that you had told the truth. Accusations have to be checked; you had come,

politely, tactfully, as you claimed, to do some checking. I found that natural. You would not, I thought, come again.

But after you left, with a few jokes I found rather over-polished through long usage, I found myself wondering. You were too amused, you made too many jokes. A policeman in your position would be excessively stiff and embarrassed in conversation with a person as well known and highly regarded in his profession as I am. You were not stiff enough. You looked, too, as much as you talked - at myself, at my surroundings, at everything – and you are, you will be the first to admit, an expansive talker. I did not find much reassurance in your eye.

Four

I had, of course, considered the fact that Casimir might have had some confidant. But this confidant could be nobody that the police – or anyone else – would think of as a reliable witness, because the confidence would disclose the fact that he was attempting blackmail. I say attempting, because of course he never got a penny from me. I do not understand the mentality of anyone who pays blackmail. One knows it will never stop. However great their cowardice the sensation of being skinned at regular intervals must grow too strong. There will come a time sooner or later to all of them when killing is easier than paying. But if everybody thought like that there would be no blackmailers either. The life expectation would be too short.

There is another possibility. Casimir may have tried this game on with another person, or even several. If that or these persons had an inkling that I was proposed for entry to their club, they might have drawn conclusions from Casimir's demise, and pitched in some accusation, anonymously of course, to divert any eventual suspicion from themselves. But I did not think much of this notion. I have never put your intelligence so low, my friend, as to imagine that a responsible officer of police would entertain an anonymous denunciation of an utterly respectable doctor. In order to approach me at all, however tactfully or obliquely, the police had, I knew, something a good deal stronger. Some live, real, actual person.

Casimir I inherited when I took over this house from old Dr Munck, who retired full of years, honours and wealth at the age of nearly eighty (still enormously active) went immediately on a walking holiday at some winter sports centre, was obstinate enough to disregard local knowledge, and was killed next day by a fall of loose snow. Casimir's tenancy came about, I should guess, some time in the thirties. The supply of country girls began to dry up, servants had grown too dear and too bad. Munck had the servants' story simply chopped off, and he made a thorough job of it: builders, at least, had not yet grown too dear. For it was a drastic job and crude, if effective. A staircase running down the whole side of the house, and a street door built in at the corner! Nobody would do such a thing now. But it was quite common then, when all the rooms were too big and all the houses were too high – and not a one of them with a lift!

It was never the slightest drawback. As the house stood it was quite big enough for a childless couple as well as a busy practice. Casimir never had the slightest contact with my house or myself;

there was no need. And old Munck had been quite content with the tiny rent it brought in, and so was I. As for Casimir, he had had more sense than ever to complain at his three flights of steep narrow stairs. A real studio-flat in Amsterdam is the rarest species of game in Holland.

I was under no compulsion, naturally, to tell anyone that I had been in Casimir's quarters. I made, and make no secret of the fact that I have keys to his doors. Why should I? It is normal, because of fire: a special clause in the policies covers that flat. There are, moreover, plumbing fixtures, electric wiring and so on. If I got a burst pipe or something similar I had to be able to let workmen in. As it is, on the very rare occasions when something happened I gave instructions that the workmen were to go and bother Casimir. I am a doctor after all, a busy and harassed, in the eyes of most people an important, personage. Even in his best days he was never any more than a down-at-heels painter, a person plainly born to be bothered by plumbers.

When a polite letter told me that he had trouble with a leaking roof, in fact I went to see, like a good careful landlord. I had become a little curious about Casimir and the pretext was good; a couple of tiles needed replacing. I think the episode increased his curiosity about me; it certainly increased mine about him. I had scarcely been aware of his existence. The house is very noiseless and he was a mouse-like fellow, not given to weight-lifting, tap-dancing, or manipulating pneumatic drills.

Up and up I had to go along that interminable stairway, covered in some sort of coconut matting, mud-coloured long since. It smelt bad; I have an extremely sensitive nose. The rent was low – but not too low, I thought while climbing.

There is a sort of hallway at the top, with various cupboards full of brooms and things, dustbins and electricity meters and ancient overcoats – I have looked since, you see. A short passage, and at the end a door to a kind of glory-hole – decaying trunks filled with junk, and the plumbers' famous piping. On the landing were four doors, for there had been three servants' bedrooms, and a bathroom. The bathroom is now half kitchen, and two contiguous rooms have been knocked into one big studio, with mansard windows at the front of the house. There was water, gas and electricity: it must be a pretty good apartment for a painter. I know little of such things, but it was high, quiet, well lit, secure from interruption, and possessed several roof- and street-scapes. As well as fine opportunities for studying typists changing their frocks in a building opposite, between two of

the lindens: sure enough, when later on I hunted about a little, a pair of cheap binoculars was among the first things found.

Casimir was waiting for me on the landing. He was a tall scraggy thing, very round-shouldered, wearing as always a baggy hairy tweed suit of old-fashioned cut, with flappy trousers and padded shoulders to make him more impressive, which it didn't. He had had red hair, now gone grey. His big head and big anxious wrinkled forehead gave him a superficially impressive look. He had horn-rimmed glasses pushed down on his nose, his eternal cigarette half between his flabby lips and half between his disgusting teeth: I would have been ready to hate him on account of his breath alone. If he had been put out in the sun and wind of Provence, well dried out, disinfected and browned, he would have been less revolting. He had a moist pasty look, and his scurfy scalp above that skull of a face was really degrading. Can you accept that a young girl could find that attractive?

I am told that he was a good painter in his day, and had even produced memorable work and been world-famous in the twenties. But he had outlived his talents and lived, I am told, through the years following the war on a steadily declining reputation, though his name still sufficed to find a market for his work. No, my authority for all this is not, as you might think, my dear wife. Apart from the fact that I have scant regard for her much-vaunted artistic judgement, I know that she strongly disliked Casimir, and that the feeling was returned. She once, it seems, made a cutting remark about some work of his in his hearing… No, I know a surgeon with whom I play squash, who collects modern paintings, and even has some pictures done by Casimir around 1930 that he says have real worth. He had been a prodigious worker once and was still – here my authority is someone that knew him closely – capable of bouts of astonishing activity between the weeks of nothing but gin.

Certainly his name, even before I began enquiring about him, meant something even to me, but there is nothing dimmer than a figure that had a great success in the twenties. One thinks, 'Good heavens, is he still alive?'

The flat smelt even worse than the stairs, though very likely an ordinary person would have noticed nothing. It was only untidy in places, and seemed on the whole to be kept clean. I listened to his mumbling voice, had the patches of damp on his ceiling pointed out, and agreed to get the roof repaired with no more ado.

I think that I meant to kill him even then.

Five

I thought about that flat in the days following. Would it not have been a better – and more suitable – place for me to have chosen to live in than this pork-pie of a house, stuffed with expensive trappings of thick carpets, rich curtains, fur-coated wife (I nearly said fur-coated tongue, for that is the taste this house gives me)? Was it not an evil chance that I should have become a doctor, forced to keep up an elaborate front, and not a painter, who can keep up a front or not exactly as he pleases? Naked women are as much a salient feature of his life as they are of a doctor's – nobody would have fastened spitefully upon my perfectly harmless activities. There is no Medical Association with a censorious eye upon what a painter does or says. He is even expected to behave in a peculiar way, and if he should happen to be detected in some scabrous activity there will be a rush of sympathisers – there has been, no doubt, a reaction in favour of Cabestan, now that he is dead – all blithely declaring that not only is lechery quite normal to an 'artist' but it is even an integral part of him, necessary to him. I have heard Beatrix on this subject. Broadminded, tolerant as she would never be to those she regards as 'her class of people', prating that lechery is a fertiliser, in which the flowers of art reach their splendour. 'Art is a flower,' she pontificates. 'You don't grow flowers in a marble-quarry.' Bitch…

Am I not an artist too? Why not? Why should there be a barrier in the minds of the ignorant between science and arts? Life is organic, a whole. It is these barriers, this splitting and sealing-off, that stunts, stultifies, desiccates the cheese-nibblers like my wife and her precious friends.

Aha, you will say upon reading this paragraph. Jealous… Yes, jealous. I killed that wretched Casimir out of personal, professional – animal – jealous hatred. That bastard stole my life. When he blackmailed me, it was to me a thin shadow of formal excuse or pretext. For the blackmail itself I cared not a rap. Bella has a husband well able to look after her.

Six

I got so heated that I stood up and walked about. Then I went and had a look at myself in the bathroom looking-glass. (Bella says she has never seen herself better-looking than there.) I do not look at myself for your benefit, my dear van der Valk. I am aware that your trained eye has absorbed every detail of my appearance and manner that could appear indicative. I do the same. Like me, you accustom yourself to using meetings, conversations, examinations, as tools in your trade. We have, as you have remarked jokingly on two or three occasions, a great deal in common… You form impressions of people. Is so-and-so likely to be a criminal? No, that is not fair to you. Capable of being criminal? I would say, and for all I know you would agree with me, that everybody is. Regardless of who or what he may be.

No, I went to look in the glass above the washstand to look at the man as you see him. I wish to see what you see. I am not even familiar with my own appearance, for I have no personal vanity and except as attributes to love I dislike looking-glasses. I shave with my jaw reflected in the tiny mirror let into the inside of the box my razor lives in. I comb my hair, which is short and straight, without needing any reference to my reflection. I know that it is clean, tidy and healthy; what further interest have I? At the barber's, I keep my eyes resolutely shut; I find it a good place to rest and it discourages their infernal tattle. In my apartments, I have no looking-glasses; I pay large amounts of money to tailors to see that my suits fit me. The only glass there is in any room I frequent is the one above the washstand, in the bathroom between the examination- and consulting-rooms.

It is one of the most important places in the house! How many women who arrived in my house combed and collected, impeccably painted, sometimes cold and haughty to cover their fear, have later seen themselves dishevelled in that glass. It excited and fascinated you from the start, I noticed. You need no guiding hand through that labyrinth at least. One of the first things you did, I'll be bound, was to make a little sketch-map of the way the house is arranged. Old Munck had, of course, this consulting-room, and his examination-room at the back as it is now, the discreetly curtained windows of the former verandah looking out on the chestnut-tree in the garden. But Munck had his secretary in the 'bathroom', and his waiting-room was the one opening off the hall. It was my idea to put my secretary upstairs, and have a second waiting-room there. It greatly annoyed

Beatrix, but it was quite natural and not in the least sinister. A neurologist is always half psychiatrist, and my patients do not care to meet each other or to be seen by anyone but myself and Miss Maas – and not always by her; by no means always! She leaves at four-thirty, and her day is taken up with the telephone and the appointments book, the records and the accounts. My most solid witness! She has been with me since I began in practice, and has never seen anything not of the most perfect propriety. Nor, I may add, would she believe it if she did. She has known patients to behave in the oddest ways and nothing surprises her. You will have decided, regretfully, that Miss Maas will be of little use to you.

But we were talking about the bathroom. I admit that it is vulgar; there are heavy rubber tiles that have a pleasantly soft, matt feel under bare feet; the washstand and the bidet are 'porcelaine de Paris' with the classic ivy-leaf motifs, and the shower is lined with tiles in the same pattern. The towel rail is heated, and there is discreet austere soap from Roger & Gallet. I do admit that any expensive hotel gives you just the same. That is the point, in a sense, as you will see if you think a moment.

For you wrinkled your nose at it. You found this luxury contemptible and though you said nothing your face told me that in Holland the most expensive doctors content themselves with a plain washstand in the corner of the examination-room, and that this was all very singular and suspect.

You make me laugh, because for all your sophisticated experience you are a puritan still. Even here in Amsterdam, the only town in Holland where there is a scrap of aristocracy and a scrap, as well, of canaille, one can never be outside the sphere of conventional morality. To have a bath more than once a week is simply not done. As far as I know I am the only person that has succeeded in breaking this rule.

I am making excuses. I know that the bathroom is a weakness, and not only in the evidential sense. It is my streak of sensuality and my yielding for once to the power of sheer wealth. And the women enjoy it so! In my bathroom a woman puts back her face, her self-command – her mask of morality! After a half-hour in my bathroom no woman has ever shown the faintest sign of hysteria, of rancour, of jealousy, nor of any emotional exaggeration. It is a therapy – just like everything else I do. I always left them there for as long as they wished. When they came out I would be writing quietly at my bureau. But I had nearly forgotten, in the defence of my bathroom, that I went there to have a look at myself, wondering what you will

find, there behind the features.

The features are nothing remarkable. My hair is short and stiff, and goes sideways at the top of a fairly high forehead. The face is long and narrow, with large ears and a wide mouth. The eyes and nose are large too but regular – no, the face is not bad, I confess; it has character and humour as well as intelligence. Nobody will believe there should be malice in the lines I have in plenty around eyes and mouth, and nobody will think that the character in that straight nose and neat jaw can be so very dreadful. My voice is deep, calm and deliberate, with quite a pleasant intonation, and the eyes are clear grey and have a level frank look. As a doctor, this face has helped me a good deal. With women, of course, a face is unimportant; I could have the face of an orang-outang, the wild man of the woods, and it would never have made the faintest odds. What is it you see? I am curious.

Seven

You appeared again a week and more after the first time. I suppose you had calculated that this was a good interval, enough to make me stew tender, grow uneasy, begin to crumble. I had not crumbled, because I know how people like you work. I had decided that you were anything but satisfied, and that when unsatisfied you would be bulldoggish. I knew that while you would find little to grip in my slippery surface it would be a long while before you let go. There would be a long period of patient calm enforced upon myself before you went away, satisfied or not.

This time again I was struck by a certain force of imagination you possess. You had thought up an original comic approach that was designed to put me off my stroke and you would, I guessed, continue this tip-and-run act, a war of irritation and attrition. I felt fairly sure that you would never adopt the laborious plodding of the average police action, setting large men in raincoats to watch the house, with long tedious lists of every visitor. You wanted to gain a foothold in my interior, in my castle, among my fortifications, there to prepare a subterranean sap to blow me up when I least expected it. So you phoned Miss Maas for an appointment exactly like any businessman with stress symptoms, and in you sailed to the consulting-room, cheerful and full of obtuse self-satisfaction. I was not deceived by this air of imbecility.

"Would you prefer the chair there, or do you feel more at ease on the sofa?"

My consulting-room is extremely pleasant, a large high square room with two big windows that face the tree-shaded street. It was fine warm weather and all the lindens were looking their best. My bureau is placed cornerwise, between the windows and the side wall, lined with bookshelves, behind which one goes zigzagging upstairs towards Casimir. There is no more furniture than is needed in this room, but there is a large sofa of warm ripe yellowish leather. Plenty of people, and especially women, prefer to sit here than in the 'customer's' chair at the corner of my bureau.

"I think I do prefer the sofa," in your voice of jovial idiocy, "I like the look of it very much."

"How's your health?"

"I don't know; there's all sorts of queer things wrong with me, I suspect. What can you treat?"

"Many things. Not conditions plainly requiring surgery, though I have sometimes succeeded in avoiding it even when it looked

urgent."

"But there is a thing called neurosurgery."

"A very exacting discipline, outside my abilities. I could probably whip your appendix out for you; that's just elementary carpentry."

"What do you do most of?"

"I get a lot of people whose troubles border on psychiatric booboo things and who need no psychiatric treatment. And of course many people on the obverse side, with insomnia or something that they imagine is a sign of mental trouble, due to a purely physical origin. And, evidently, an army of psychosomatic aches and pains. Is that what you want to know?"

"You do massage?"

"Frequently. And I often send patients to a masseur."

"And electric things, shock and so on?"

"I give no shock treatments; they belong in certain types of insanity. I use vibration, warmth, sometimes heat, various short waves, ranging from ultra-violet to feeble X-ray. I also use warm air and both warm and cold water," I added, a little too sarcastically.

"And I suppose fruit and herb cures, and swimming, and riding bicycles?"

"Certainly. We have not, I'm afraid, the time to indulge in an explanation of the various possible applications of these things. You could, of course, go and read up your *Larousse Médical."*

"Oh I have," you shouted enthusiastically. "Become my favourite reading these last weeks… You treat skin diseases?" you asked suddenly.

"I'm not a dermatologist. Occasionally, when they are of nervous origin, as they quite frequently are."

"And cosmetic treatments?"

I decided you needed a snub. "What are cosmetic treatments?"

"Oh, making old women beautiful again with calve's liver or some such thing."

"My poor friend, you have been reading magazines. There are cosmetic surgeons, and there are gerontologists, who use hormone treatments upon occasion. That has no interest for me. Such ideas."

"I have been told you made people younger."

"Let me make myself clear. If a patient comes to me with a disordered system, living an overloaded or unhealthy life, and I am able to help him, he feels better. In a flush of well-being, he tells his friends he feels 'years younger' and the ignorant, like you, loving drama, imagine that I possess magical powers and miracle cures.

Superstition."

You were not too snubbed. During this absurd speech you looked at me steadily with your sunny, benevolent expression unchanged.

"You have, however, a large number of women patients in early middle age."

"And do I really need to explain that to you?"

"Do. Why not? Since, as you say, I am ignorant."

"Every doctor has many patients of the type you describe. They are bored, nervous from doing nothing, needing distractions and amusements: a fertile ground for all sorts of ills. Add that women of this age suffer various biological disturbances and you get the common coin of every doctor's life. Why do we discuss these trivialities?"

"When they may not be altogether trivial. When they may even have a suspicion of malpractice about them."

I turned a glassy eye on you.

"I have concluded that you have received some scurrilous letter. Accusing me of making off with old Cabestan and now, apparently, of malpractice with women patients – if I understand you rightly."

Casual nod.

"What I do not follow is your taking these rubbishy things seriously. A person with a grievance, exactly as I sketched for you at a previous meeting, seizing upon anything that might be ground on which a doctor could be attacked."

"We got one, quite sober letter, not at all in scurrilous terms, simply saying that you had suppressed Cabestan because he had evidence that you misconducted professional relationships and had threatened to expose the fact." Your voice was quite colourless.

"Unfortunately," I spoke drily, "Mr Cabestan's death is the one fact that is real and demonstrable in all this. If you really feel that anyone, not to speak of myself, killed him, you surely need something to support the supposition. Was there any medical examination, for instance?"

"Oh yes."

"With what result, if I may allow myself the curiosity of asking?"

"None whatever," cheerfully.

"Then surely the whole idea falls to the ground. This accusation could not stand up in a court. I hesitate to threaten, myself, but you must realise that any person accused on insufficient grounds of criminal action possesses means of defending himself. Wrongful arrest, interference with the liberty of the subject, or whatever."

"Has anybody interfered with your liberty?"

"Defamation of character."

"There isn't any. Come, Doctor, I'm your patient, and any conversation between us is private and privileged. The famous medical secrecy."

"A conversation sounding like blackmail?"

"We don't blackmail people," mildly. "Nor do we pursue frivolous accusations without grounds."

"You mean you really think you do have grounds?"

"Oh yes. We even have a witness."

"Produce this witness."

"When the time comes."

"A witness, my friend, that hides, is not a very solid witness, nor one in whom anybody could have confidence. I think that I will ask my professional association to take steps to ensure my protection. I will complain against illegal, unauthorised and unjustifiable police interference."

You had been leading me on, of course, with deliberately weak arguments, tempting me to come out with this. I had been trapped, as I now realised. You proceeded, now, to blackmail me quite shamelessly. You have, my dear van der Valk, some good qualities, and you have, as well, a sort of low cunning that is revolting.

"You do that, Doctor," with your country-boy's broad beam, "if you really think it would do you any good to make any aspect of this affair more public. If you take such steps, the press get the substance of the complaint against you; it's inevitable. You might end up by regretting your hasty move. As things stand, this is all no more than a friendly, discreet, personal little chat between you and me. Doctor and patient! This witness – we do not produce him simply because we wish to know how much weight to give his words. A standard of comparison. The person to provide that is yourself; surely that's obvious. You must realise that my movements are heavily biased on the side of your protection and the assumption of your complete innocence of all this. Surely that is how it should be," silkily. "If you prefer – really prefer – a noisy, public, clumsy enquiry, with your secretary, your patients, even your wife dragged into the dirty-minded stare of the public, well… There would be a cloud of gossip – exactly that malicious and stupid gossip you mentioned at our first meeting. By all means, if you prefer it, but I cannot see that it would help you.

It wasn't badly done. If I did not make an intelligent answer it would look bad whichever alternative I chose. I reached for a

cigarette and lit it.

"Listen carefully, Mr van der Valk, to what I have to tell you."

You indicated jovially that you were all ears.

"I find your behaviour deplorable – typical, I suppose, of the police. You threaten me with mysteries, and when I seek to protect myself you threaten me with publicity. I refuse to be stampeded by this talk of accusations and witnesses, all the purest invention. I cannot see what you hope to gain by pestering me, and I cannot, apparently, stop you without further annoyance. Very well, do what you please; that is at least the smallest of these irritations. I allow you to talk to me since only by so doing can I convince you that you are wasting your time. If you wish to spend your days hanging about my house you must decide for yourself. I will give thought to the problem of how a citizen in a sensitive profession can best shield himself from jacks-in-office. If you wish to go any further than speaking to me, if you nose in my books or my household you must provide yourself with legal authority, which I will contest. I make myself clear?"

You got up, laughing.

"Suits me. This remains between the two of us. Just a friendly chat from time to time. Doctor and patient!" You laid your hand on the doorknob. "Which of us is which, eh, Doctor?" You walked out convulsed with idiot merriment; I watched you go, quietly, smoking and sending a screen of smoke after you, not bothering to make polite faces.

Is this witness of yours a pure invention? Do you really dare me to complain? You must know that if I did you would lose your job, since your approach to me is blatantly unethical and illegal. Consequently, you are very sure. Sure of yourself, sure that I will not risk either an official investigation or the subsequent publicity. You are a good poker-player. I cannot, of course, welcome a knock-down-and-drag-out case, since sooner or later someone would lose their head and yelp out matters sufficiently compromising to me. On the other hand, you cannot possibly prove I killed Casimir. Of that I am quite sure.

Who could this witness be? Someone you cannot legally use, since you are so coy about it?

Could it conceivably be Beatrix?

Somebody there is, or you would not dare me so brashly to complain of your indefensible behaviour. You have somewhere, an ace in the hole.

Eight

I had no patients the evening that Casimir came. It must have been coincidence, since he cannot possibly have known that. I think now that he was merely pushing forward a pawn, thinking that if I reacted he would develop his offensive. I agreed to see him out of curiosity as much as anything. This man whom I hated, whom I feared, who had had, already, an unforeseen effect upon my life – I was curious to try and understand better. Him, his life – which I envied – is it not absurd? Be it as it may I had no evening engagement. No patient, no mistress, no concert. And we live in Amsterdam. There is no question, as there would be in a German city of this magnitude and importance, of saying 'Have we nothing to do? Let's go to the Opera then.'

Beatrix was going out, of course. She goes out every night that she does not spend prating with her peers here, or staring at her television programmes. What on earth is it that she does? She cultivates her intellectuals, I suppose. She frequents all sorts of pretentious and hollow figures that whim brings into the fashion - so-called painters and writers, very probably the self-styled 'conférenciers' and 'cabaretiers' of the television. These excursions she calls 'being in touch with the stream of modern thought'. I have, naturally, long given up trying to show her that a flow of chatter may well be called a stream, but that it is neither modern nor thought.

I do not speak like that out of vanity, notice. I have myself few pretensions at being intellectual, and none at all at being modern even in my work. Any doctor will confirm for you that the scientific research into the origins of disease and into new nostrums is sometimes impressive and occasionally heartening. He will also confirm that every lunatic asylum in Europe is filled to three times its maximum capacity.

As for thought… I am fairly widely read. By no means all my energies, whatever you may imagine, nor my curiosities, go into seducing women, an occupation that takes perhaps one per cent of my time. There are people who get more pleasure from the dodging and the plotting, the evasion of others and the making of furtive assignations, than they do from their rather pallid adulteries. I am not among them. My distraction is music. I go perhaps to half of the concerts and recitals given here in Amsterdam, which are often very good.

You will have been puzzled to find that I appear to have no friends. It is true, but friendship is rare. I have a couple of

professional friends, with whom I talk medicine or music. But I have a closed character. There is nobody that knows anything about me. There, my friend – believe me, I use the word here in consciousness of its meaning – you will have struck a blank. Make of the fact whatever you please.

I have, of course, a need for affection. You would be surprised to know how much I receive.

Casimir had written no note, of course. He rang at the front and I let him in myself. He had counted on my answering in person, since he must know that I employ only daily help. There has never been a maid that slept in the house, and since Beatrix has always been sterile in every meaning of the word there has never been a child to care for.

Casimir stood in the hallway gibbering and mouthing. Might he explain something? I supposed he was bothered about something the builders had said or done while mending the roof. I hoped they had not found dry rot or anything: I am fond of this house and should be loath to see its fabric altered or replaced.

I let him into my consulting-room. This is much more my private room than that idiotic 'drawing-room' Beatrix takes pride in, on the first floor. I have inherited all old Munck's arrangements, including the excellent idea that only patients should be allowed at the front door. He put in the iron staircase at the back, and the glassed passage to the back door. The bell at the back rings in the kitchen during the day, and at night it is answered by the chauffeur – he prefers being called that to gardener – or his wife, in the cottage at the back. I have made no alterations at all, except for moving Miss Maas upstairs to make room for the 'bathroom'. One might think all this awkward, but things of the sort are inevitable when a doctor has his practice under his own roof, an arrangement I prefer to the English system of a house where four or five doctors hive together for consultations. There is no real invasion of privacy. Beatrix complains that since patients have been allowed upstairs they pretend to lose their way and peep at her rooms. I pay no attention; in anyone else's house she would do exactly the same. And if we do, by any chance, have guests, and use as a consequence the front door, the stairs, and the damned drawing-room, it is evening and there are no patients. All European doctors have similar arrangements, and it is never a bother.

I sat Casimir down on the patient's chair, went myself to sit behind the bureau, and offered him the box of cigarettes, since for a wonder his mouth was empty. He took one greedily.

"Well… Repairs gone off all right? No further trouble with the

roof?"

"No…no. They replaced a few tiles, I think. I suppose you'll want to look to see exactly what they have done."

"I haven't the least interest in seeing what they have done."

I may have sounded a scrap tart; Casimir looked flabbergasted anyway. He is just the type to accuse the servants of theft if there were a rubber band missing. If he were rich as Onassis he would creep about from bathroom to bathroom sticking slivers of old soap together.

"What is it exactly you wish to see me about?"

He shuffled about inside that tweed jacket, as though the hairs tickled his neck.

"It's a – uh, personal matter, really."

I lit a cigarette myself so that I would notice less the flavour of gin and unmended teeth that hung about.

"Since you asked especially to see me, I take it there is something on your mind."

"Yes, indeed. Of importance. Just that…uh…" I said nothing, looked at him. In all honesty I had no suspicion whatever.

"The fact is that some time ago one evening I happened to be in the garden."

"And may I ask not only what you were doing in my garden but how you came to get into it?"

He surprised me by giving a pathetic answer, irrelevant of course but the truth, I think.

"I'm not getting any younger, and I find I get odd irrational fears, and I've been agitated at the idea that there might be a fire, and if I were upstairs and if," laboriously, "I couldn't reach – there were fire on the staircase, you see, and…" he just trailed off.

"Are you asking me to make you a fire escape or are you asking for advice about your irrational fears?"

"Well yes, but that isn't really the most important."

"I'm afraid I won't consider the fire escape: if you find that flat too isolated it would be best to look for another. What else is there then?"

His answer was the really brazen remark of someone who is a great coward.

"I have these fears, yes, but you see I'm getting on a bit, and I know of course I do drink a good deal, and I have worries about money, and I thought the best thing really would be if you could let me have a quite small regular sum of money."

Only then really did light dawn on my wits. After all I am a neurologist. People who come with the most rambling and incoherent tales of obscure fears are legion.

"Ah. And what do you think entitles you to claim that regular sums of money would be the best treatment for your age and infirmities?"

Casimir, of course, had had this answer ready for a long while. "What I saw in the garden," with a decayed and sickly grin.

There are Venetian blinds, naturally, covering those verandah windows where my examination-room is built out, and there are curtains as well. How could anybody get into the garden anyway, even at night, except by the aid of some involved and difficult clambering? Casimir has not what one would call an athletic figure, and I made up my mind at once that whatever he had seen or imagined, this was not a likely tale.

"Most remarkable," I said unpleasantly. "I am not a psychiatrist, Mr Cabestan, but you might be well advised to try and realise how unreal this tale must sound. I can assure you that a practising physician is not a honeypot for wasps to gather round."

He went red, patchily.

"That high and mighty tone won't help you," stung. "What I've got on you will soon make you sing smaller, when it sinks in." He heaved his clotheshorse of a frame on to its feet and stumped jerkily towards the door. "I'll give you twenty-four hours, no more, to think things over. After that – the Medical Association, and the press. I shouldn't wonder then if the police were quick to pay a call, too, once it was public. Twenty-four hours. I'll be at home. Just ring at the doorbell when you've seen the light, before this time tomorrow evening."

"Goodbye, Mr Cabestan," I said politely. "Remember what I have said – a psychiatrist is more competent to help you than myself."

I watched him out, and observed him from behind my curtains: he stood on the pavement a while jerking around and mumbling to himself. When I heard the angry slam of his street door, which is only a metre away, as you know, from my corner of the consulting-room, I sat down to consider.

No, consider is the wrong word; that is pure self-deception. I was frightened and angry. It is frightening to discover someone has grounds for blackmailing one, the attempt itself gives a nasty nervous shock, and there is the added fear – a tedious nagging uncertainty – of not knowing what those grounds could be. What did he know, or more exactly, how much? Just how much? I thought at once about Suzanne, with my belly full of fear. I had a good look at the garden,

and then went back to the bureau, where I poured out a moderate glass of cognac. I was a little calmer already. He could not have direct evidence. The most he could have was what he might conceivably have been told – the hows and the whys of the telling passed, for the moment, my understanding. Nobody would believe Cabestan. I did not think he was really mentally disturbed in any medical sense, but he was in poor health, vague and unreliable, not perhaps exactly disreputable but not a figure to inspire confidence in anybody. Except in young innocent girls, I muttered as wildly as he could have. My thoughts, nearly at peace, were turned suddenly to the overmastering hatred I felt for Casimir. One moment I was considering calmly that however damaging his insinuations no responsible person would give him credence or even audience – next moment I was clutching the neck of the cognac bottle. I drank some then. It made me shudder violently, for I am not a drinker; I like a small glass before going to bed. Once again my thoughts stumbled, changed direction involuntarily, and took a new turn.

Casimir – I had got close to him in these last weeks; I almost always thought of him now in terms of his ridiculous first name - had gone off frightened too. Frustrated, but most of all frightened at his own intrepidity. He was a scared blackmailer. Was not that likely to make him dangerous? Plainly, and I wondered why, he had come to hate me as I hated him. How much gin had he needed to steady his weak nerves and his wobbling knees, after seeing me? A good deal, I rather thought. Quite enough to make him thoroughly drunk and incapably dozy.

It was at that moment that the desire gripped me. I can only describe it as a thirst. Once it enters the mind it penetrates the whole physical organism. In the throat, the mouth, the stomach, the head, the hands, burns the thirst.

Have you ever wished to kill a man, van der Valk? You and a policeman and it is conceivable, even quite likely, that you have pointed a firearm at some shadowy and fugitive figure. When you pressed the trigger, did you wish to kill? Did you feel that thirst? I am told that the pressing of the trigger can in certain conditions produce instant orgasm. I am not concerned with that. I can only recall a thirst so insistent… Wished to kill. Have you? Have you?

My mind now worked with startling ease and rapidity. If I were now to react to Cabestan very quickly and suddenly indeed… The blackmail I had already forgotten. It was a small mechanism in my mind, I think, what one might call a percussion cap. The explosive charge was my hate.

Casimir would suspect, if I put him off with words, and even if I paid him a large sum which I could later take steps to recover, that I was meditating malice. Once in fear of his miserable existence he would try to take some steps to ensure it. Hardly the Medical Association – not as long as he thought there was the faintest chance of money. But perhaps some third person. I hardly knew, as long as I was also ignorant of what exactly he had come to hear. But he would certainly be in high hopes over the next twenty-four hours that I would climb down. Little he knew me, and of what ferocity and finality I was capable. I was going, I saw, to react to Monsieur Cabestan with a suddenness that would surprise both of us.

Two hours after he had left I decided that he was sufficiently far gone in his cups. Ring the doorbell indeed! Monsieur Cabestan appeared to have forgotten, so little interest had I always shown in his doings and movements, that I possessed the keys to his doors. I had been sitting in the dark a long while, accustoming my eyes to it. Finishing my cognac, enjoying a cigar. Yes, enjoying, by that time. I had collected, still in the dark, a hypodermic syringe, a pair of surgical gloves, a bottle containing gin, as much money as I could lay my hands on, and two or three trivial unremarked household objects. Half an hour later Casimir, who had been foolish enough to get extremely drunk, breathed, in a coma, his last. He had noticed nothing from beginning to end; I doubt if he even felt the hypodermic needle. I spent some time then, determined to be clearheaded, seeing whether anything could have been left – by him, not by me – that could point my way when he was discovered. I found nothing, and reflected that I would have a better opportunity within a day or two.

I went home. Beatrix had returned and gone to bed, unconscious that I had been walking softly about just over her head. I tidied up, went to the kitchen, and had a glass of hot milk. I reviewed matters in bed, but I fell very rapidly asleep. Even the pain of thinking about Suzanne had been effaced, or more accurately excised under anaesthesis.

You are going to say that I am a doctor. Had I no professional conscience? As a doctor, was I not aware of the value – the sacredness, as we are told emotionally – of life? I think that it was not the doctor that killed Casimir. I do not think it was even the man. I think that Casimir was killed by the young student who loved Suzanne, who was a bare three years older than she was. An adolescent. In adolescence, one feels nothing of this weightiness of life. That is why adolescents make the only really satisfactory soldiers. The adult who makes a really good soldier has a narrow, rigid and, I am certain, unbalanced mind. He has many of the

characteristics of the psychopath.

Nine

The day following the next I was drinking a cup of cocoa at around ten-thirty in the morning – a bright, warm, sunny summer morning – and resting for five minutes between patients, when Miss Maas came in. I looked up a second in some surprise, for she never disturbs me at work but with very good cause. I thought a patient had probably cancelled; recall that I was occupied with my work, which I am good at. Casimir was simply not in my mind.

"Forgive me but I thought I should ask you. I have a slightly agitated young man outside, with some involved tale about the lodger."

Miss Maas has several small harmless snobberies and has always referred to Casimir in this way, generally once a year, when the accountant comes to go over my income and arrives at the checking of taxes, rates, and so on, calculated for the third floor.

"I think we may have to intervene. The lodger, it seems, does not answer his bell, and hadn't yesterday either, and this young man fears a mishap. It occurred to me that we have keys; they'll be in the safe. Should I perhaps go myself, or should I look for a patrolling policeman? Mrs van der Hulst is in the top waiting-room whenever you're ready for her."

"I think that sounds sensible, Miss Maas."

The conclusion was reached when I emerged at lunchtime. Miss Maas had immured the police, a plainclothes man by this time, in the bottom waiting-room, where I noticed that the daily girl had been a bit negligent with her dusting that morning.

"Very sorry indeed to trouble you, sir. I think we have all the available facts from your secretary; she's been most helpful. Simply that since you are the owner of the property, sir, I thought it best to explain to you…"

"I'm afraid I've been busy with patients the whole morning and haven't yet the least idea what it's all about. Can you just give me a brief account?"

"Sorry, sir, of course. Gentleman upstairs is dead, I'm afraid. Wasn't in good health as we hear and been drinking heavily, habitually too. He must have collapsed up there and not been able to call for help; there's no phone there either and it's high of course. We've had the police doc; heart failure, night before last probably, and we've taken him away. There's just his property and things, and that's on your premises, sir. Oh, here's your keys again; sorry, I forgot to give them to the lady."

“I’m sorry to hear all this. I hardly knew him at all, but he’s been a fixture here in the house since before my time. What about family and so on?”

“Can’t tell yet, sir. Young man who came is an acquaintance, but knows nothing, he says; I thought you might have known, perhaps.”

“I’m afraid I have no idea, but I feel a certain responsibility. Perhaps the bank?”

“That’s a possibility.”

“Perhaps if the bank feels able to send someone round he could come and see me, and I will help in any way I can.” “Very obliging of you, sir.”

I took the keys, sent Miss Maas for lunch with the remark that I would have to go and see about this, and went up those stairs, noticing in calm now a step that had alarmed me two nights before by creaking, but without emotion: I was simply being forced to play the polite hypocrite for a day, a thing I had had to bear in mind throughout. The police had rummaged about hurriedly looking for a clue where to shuffle off the bother, and had not found the tape recorder any more than I had. There was a very long flex to the microphone, which I calcuated would be just right, when dangled out of the window, to reach my verandah windows. It seemed an amateurish and inefficient way of spying. Still… I satisfied myself that Casimir had left nothing else; his hiding-places for things were obvious.

The bank, since this was an unrewarding affair, sent a minion, a foolish young man who grovelled before me in the stiff phrases that had been taught him. We went through all papers. I felt confident that I could handle anything that might crop up, but there was nothing. We unearthed some cousin in the provinces who could be called on to arrange the funeral and get rid of the belongings… It was all very simple, and a phone call to the manager of the bank next day convinced me that there was nothing amiss. I instructed Miss Maas to send flowers, which I am sure she did with her usual skill and taste.

Ten

You have grasped, my dear van der Valk, that in a sense I killed Casimir in order to inherit his flat – I could almost say his life. That flat magnetised me.

I had naturally a pretext. It was a minor problem. I could not allow it to remain empty, nor did I want another tenant, and I never even considered reconverting the house to its four original storeys. I do not think you were altogether surprised to find that I had practically moved up there, though I pretended to you only that I spent a little time there. I needed to make no changes. The cousin from the provinces had decided that the cheap furniture was not worth the trouble of moving it out and himself suggested simply leaving it there for a new tenant. The good man!

There was nothing on the spools of the tape recorder. That is to say there were scraps of conversation, since, evidently, I have my windows open sometimes, but it was an inaudible gabble. The tones of my voice could be distinguished, and there were other plainly feminine tones, some of them recognisable – to me – as those of Bella, but there was no criminal conversation. I did not know how often nor for how long Casimir had tried this trick, but however pertinacious he had not been successful. Nothing had been achieved that way.

Just what way had it been achieved?

Bella is a delightful woman. She is a little too noisy, but she is warm-hearted, charming and amusing. She is not conspicuous for brains, her education is sketchy, and the contrast with Beatrix complete. She has sense, character and worth, and being a good mimic she has fitted herself excellently into her local milieu, that of big business. Her husband is the director of a merchant banking firm, with large financial interests. A man of sixty, somewhat desiccated but not uninteresting. I know little about him, but enough; I treated him once. He asks little enough of her but to provide the usual comforts and amenities, like entertaining, which she does well, I imagine. She knows how to charm, how to patter the hostess jargon, and I am sure that her food and drink and flowers are admirably organised.

She came to me with commonplace nervous troubles of a pretty, energetic woman of forty who has not enough to do. Absolutely banal complaints like chronic constipation, common to all these women. She has a fashionable family doctor, who often sends me patients: he is very conscientious and very busy, and since they have plenty of

money he sends them to me. I always send them back cured.

She is one of the women whom I have come to feel real affection for. Certainly Bella has given me plenty of affection back, though at the start she was simply a woman to my taste. I recall how pleased I was when I saw her first: her enchanting warm smile, her enthusiastic voice, her pleasure in simple little things, her naive snobbery – a nice person. She had all the attributes I find attractive; she is like a very good cake. Everything about her is right, her furs, her perfume, her lacy, silky, wealthy underclothes. Her figure was and is admirable and she had just the right mixture of provincial beliefs and little petty moral rigidities. I enjoyed her immensely even before I came to value her.

I telephoned Bella and she came to see me for a 'check-up'. She was in good health and looking splendid. She gave my cheek an affectionate little tick with her rings.

"Naughty," she said, going off to the bathroom.

"How is Suzanne?" I asked when she came back, putting her weapons back in her handbag.

"She's all right. Tiresome, yes, but I'm hoping now she'll grow out of it. There's so much that is new at that age; one forgets quickly."

"Never any disagreeable aftertaste from our arrangements?"

"Not the slightest."

That, anyway, put me at ease. Casimir had either not dared or not known enough for certain to approach Bella with requests to keep him comfortable in his old age.

There I was, in perfect security. Till you walked in.

We have come to your third visit. In the course of the first two, I had had an uneasy suspicion that you might one day come to detect me. But it was on this occasion that I felt, for the first time, the certainty that you had understood. Not only that you were capable of understanding.

You asked abruptly to see Casimir's flat. I had told you off about poking in my house, but I had no way of objecting to this request.

"You will have keys, no doubt?" Of course you knew this; it was in the police report.

"Oh, yes; they're even in my pocket." You would see anyway that I had them in my pocket. "I've been rearranging it. There was some old junk that needed clearing out."

We walked up the stairs.

"I spend some time up here myself." I let it fall coolly; I wasn't going to let you think you had me at a disadvantage.

“A refuge?” cocking that nasty bright blue eye of yours.

“Perhaps a game. I had never set foot here, you know: I was agreeably surprised to find out how pleasant it was. I have decided not to consider a new tenant. The one drawback is that interminable staircase.”

“It should be a spiral staircase. Then you would be in a lighthouse – seductive feeling.” You seemed to be talking to yourself.

“And who keeps it clean? – you do that, too.” People’s household arrangements, even trivial details, have a lot of importance to you; I have noticed that. You roamed about, stared out of the window leaned out and peered at the garden below. My back room stuck out just there where the verandah used to be, and I wondered whether you had thought of Casimir’s idiotic tape-machine trick.

You sat down on the divan, a narrow cheap thing from some multiple store; I sleep on it three or four times a week – I had not accepted Casimir’s bed, a scrap too personal an object. My own bedroom is a great deal more comfortable, but there is only a door between Beatrix and myself. I sleep very well, up here.

You were sitting on the divan now, turning over some of my ‘bedside books’. You glanced up with – it sounds odd, I know – with something like respect. I do not think I can be altogether wrong. I was studying you too, for I had the sudden knowledge of a bond between us. This was increased when I noticed with amusement that you no longer looked like a policeman, for you had the look of simple pleasure that anyone who likes books gets with a book between his hands. At that moment you had, I can swear, no interest in crime or criminals. You were feeling too, I knew, for contact between us. I thought then that you would not try to arrest me, however much evidence you possessed, before making a genuine effort to grasp for understanding of the things you did not know, would never know.

Is it not to help you in that, and that alone, that I have written a thick loose-leaf notebook?

It is not a need to be understood. I have made that clear already. It is more the friendship that exists between soldiers that fight against each other. I have no friends of this sort, perhaps because I have never been a soldier; my military service was first deferred and then cancelled. Perhaps because I have never given the kind of gift one needs for friendship. To have suffered together? I am groping; it is one of the things that are closed books to me.

You were turning over a book now that I picked up recently out of a casual coincidence, for the writer has the same name as myself. A South-African Dutchman – become English since, but without losing

the grip on his own country – a Colonel van der Post. The book has a banal, probably deliberately understated title. The name is all we share, and it is a common enough Dutch name. I have never served in the army, let alone become English, I have never been in Africa bar a holiday once – should I use the word honeymoon? – in Tunis, I have never been in a Japanese prison camp, I have never climbed a mountain, I have never forged friendships – there lies, perhaps, my fascination with this book.

You were searching for some memory, turning pages.

"There is, somewhere, a letter to his wife. No, from his wife – I have it."

Your voice loses its professional monotony when you have a book in your hands, reading from it.

"It seems to me that people's private and personal lives have never mattered as they do now. For me the whole future depends on the way people live their personal rather than their collective lives. It is a matter of extreme urgency. When we have all lived out our private and personal problems we can consider the next, the collective step."

You looked at me with no grin for a minute, then the harsh lines reappeared with the two huge furrows alongside your mouth. I thought you looked tired and battered and middle-aged, though you are several years younger than I am.

"Thought for today," you said hatefully. And went back down to the consulting-room. And picked your everyday policeman's hat off the peg with your everyday policeman's look back on. And the grin well in place.

"Au revoir, Doctor. You're a very patient patient."

Eleven

I do not think that the trouble lies anywhere but at Beatrix's door. She quite certainly knows that I seduce women patients, though she has never alluded to any such thing. But she is a most accomplished spy. She would be quite capable, I am sure, of setting afoot this mysterious oblique approach to me that culminates in your visits.

But I hardly think she can be your witness. Coming as she does from a legal and judicial family, she knows all the roundabout ways of the law, can get advice secretly, and could certainly keep out of trouble. Added to this she would never entangle her famous family by being behind a legal attempt to put an end to me. Too likely to compromise those gentlemen. She is alive to every sort of ecclesiastical nicety; she would have done no such thing.

No, I have thought carefully. Can it be Suzanne? In that case I am a dead goose, trussed and stuffed for roasting. For Suzanne, you see, has been my only real crime. I have sometimes wondered whether Beatrix, who might well know about Bella, may not have so arranged things that Suzanne should meet Casimir. It is far-fetched, perhaps. She is after all an art student; she might have met him anywhere. He would be regarded, of course – she told me so herself – as old-fashioned and even meretricious by the rising generation. She tried to conceal from me that she knew him; I only found it out by accident.

There has been no crime but for Suzanne, or you could say perhaps that there would have been no crime but for Suzanne. For everyone will be pretending that my life is extremely reprehensible, but that, as you know, and I know, is claptrap. All very dreadful, no doubt, and I would be expelled from the Medical Association with some very highflown sorrowing phrases. But I have never done any of these women the slightest harm. If I say it myself, I have done most of them a lot of good. A definite therapeutic effect. I may have scratched some moralities, but criminal – never. Let us, besides, please not be hypocritical. Give the private life of twenty other doctors the attention you are giving mine, and you will receive a surprise. The capacity that women have for getting tender over their doctors… Remarkable, my dear Inspector. I dare say, even, that it has happened to you.

Nevertheless, I am ashamed of myself.

There is of course criminal conversation with children under the legal age of consent – I do not know the legal terminology. That, I quite agree, is vicious. Still, Suzanne was a ripe sixteen and well-developed for her age. Mentally, van der Valk, mentally, in case you

find at these words an inclination to snigger.

Bella came to me one day a few months ago, in a great state.

"I want to ask your help. I have complete confidence in you, and indeed you are the only friend who can help me." Friend! There is considerable affection between Bella and myself, as well as shared secrets, jokes, and a considerable amount of pleasure. Does she think of that as friendship?

I lit her cigarette for her. As always she was looking luscious, like a peach not yet quite over-ripe, but whose juice will run uncontrollably down your chin as you bite.

"But any little thing I can do…"

"It's for my daughter – for Suzanne." I raised my eyebrows. "She's only sixteen. She's pregnant. I want to ask you – indeed I beg of you" – I must have assumed an unsympathetic expression – "will you do something? Must I put it in crude words?"

"You are asking something difficult, you know, my dear. It is not one of the things I do." You may be surprised, but this is true. I have been approached often with the same request – what doctor hasn't? - and have always turned it down flatly. Firstly, it is criminal – yes, I distinguish, and without hypocrisy.

Secondly, it is tricky. I can do it safely, of course, without risk; that is not what I mean. I mean that there is chatter. It is inevitable that such practices become widely known.

Lastly, I have an objection. Even a moral objection. Ach, not exactly the conventional moral objection, the one advanced by moralisers who have never been in touch with reality. More a personal feeling that I am barred from doing such things. Beatrix, you see, is sterile. Let me be utterly honest. She has always refused to take an opinion, which she says is humiliating to her. Humiliating! Bitch, useless bitch, caring that a doctor should know what she admitted suspecting herself. But I have never known for certain. The women I make love with take extreme pains. Once or twice I have been asked to make a woman pregnant. And I have not succeeded. Nowhere do I know of a child that belongs to me. One time, long ago, a girl delighted me, though she herself had no importance, but I found later that the child could have had any of half a dozen fathers. I had to find out, you see.

I cannot be certain that I am not myself sterile. That has given me an overmastering reason for my refusal to take children away from other people. If I cannot create, I may not destroy. Does that make any sense to you?

Bella, however, had more to say.

“I can see that you’re thinking me just like all the others that you so despise. Scared for what the neighbours would say. You will tell me to send her abroad or get her married, even. It’s not that, though. I’m really concerned for Carl.”

Carl is her husband. I have never told her so, but I know him, for I have treated him. I even like him. He came to me a year or so ago, with hypertension – I need not go into that. I helped him. I found him sympathetic, and for a reason I have just given: he wished for children of his own. He is a rigid person, naturally. He would not run after women. Bella did not want to have another child. He had said nothing, but he had transferred the devotion he had for his wife to Suzanne. He was immensely proud of her, wrapped up in her - enfin, the usual tale: the child kicked against this concentration of affection. From her mother she had a looser, less intense, more casual attention, and the mother got in return confidences that the unhappy fellow did not get. The girl had fallen among art students, and followed courses at the Conservatory or whatever they call it. If Carl, a Christian businessman if ever I saw one, found out about this unlucky pregnancy, he might turn and rend the girl. Bella was of course even more concerned at the idea that he might turn and rend Bella.

When, after a long minute’s silence, during which she had the sense to hold her tongue, I accepted, or showed signs that I might accept, I did not show that I was thinking as much of the man as of the woman, or the girl.

“I have to know more. Does the girl herself want this child?”

“She doesn’t know – at sixteen, how can she know? She isn’t at all happy at the idea of a bond with the father. I’ve checked – an unpleasant, rather undesirable person all round. Took advantage of her in a mean-minded way – got her drunk, the little idiot, after the warnings I’ve given her.”

I made up my mind, with difficulty. Had I some notion that the step meant my undoing?

“If,” I said slowly, picking my words, “you were to find a pretext for my seeing her that she would accept, I might find means to terminate this pregnancy without her being aware of the fact. How far is she?”

“Two and a half months.”

“Less bad. How’s her general health?”

“Good. She’s perhaps a scrap on the anaemic side.”

“That might serve. The miscarriage at three months is a commonplace. I must warn you that one such sometimes seems to

involve a tendency towards more."

"Oh, my dear, I would be grateful all my life. I simply daren't risk Carl's finding out." In her relief she was letting slip what really worried her. "Carl would quite assuredly throw all the blame on me, and in shock, rage, horror – believe me, you don't know my husband – he might do anything."

It was ironic that she did not suspect that this famous husband was exactly the reason why I agreed. I disregarded the outburst, tactfully.

"Send her to me."

Twelve

They were fateful words, those. A week later Suzanne was sitting on the chair opposite, and I was coming the heavy, 'Well, young lady…' Pompous puffwit that I was.

I may have been pompous, even a little adrift right from the start, because I am not accustomed to young girls. I see few, and have never been altogether at my ease with them. I can explain that, and will, perhaps, in the course of this narrative. What I cannot explain, van der Valk, is first that I found her desperately desirable, and second that I fell – yes, fell, it is the only word – in love with her. With a girl of sixteen. To explain… A phrase comes into my mind from some book or other. Disraeli said upon some occasion to an English duke – 'My dear Henry, never explain'. There is no wiser counsel. But I cannot, even had I wished, and I do wish, I suspect. I have come to wish to explain everything to you.

She was a little anaemic; it was not serious. I went into a patter; she had had colds. She said without hesitation, quite simply, that she was pregnant.

"Yes." I was giving her a general examination; she had undressed unselfconsciously and was lying on the couch. "I see as much. Well, that is all the more important, to get you in good shape, hm? I would have suggested a good holiday in the sun, but soon you won't be wishing to wear a bathing dress. Never mind. We'll give you some artificial sunlight." For I intended to give her some harmless ultra-violets, and slip in a much shorter wave, in which I am proficient; a type of deep X-ray that I know would 'do the trick' as it is revoltingly called.

I cannot explain either my tension or her abrupt encouragement of my vicious instinct. She has a splendid body, unusually finely formed for a girl of that age. Bella's body, and Bella's internal noises, I noticed while listening to her. But I had myself under control – I am a doctor, after all. My voice was calm as always, my eyes masked from her candid blue look.

Had she some suspicion of the relationship between myself and her mother? Bella had perhaps been a scrap indiscreet in getting her to come and see me. Had she wished to get me in some way in her power? Had she some youthfully cynical contempt for men in general, acquired from her recent experiences? I have no idea. I cannot tell. Break your head on it, if you will.

For she deliberately encouraged me, and I lost my head.

I can only relate that for a month she came for treatment. She

seemed indifferent to me. And I was possessed by passion for that girl. I raged in her. I made a beast of myself the way one does sometimes in a very expensive restaurant. And I loved her. In a way I have loved no one.

A month. Then she simply stopped coming. Bella came one day after, and told me that Suzanne had had a harmless, painless miscarriage. She was much relieved. She kept saying so. She said that Carl knew nothing, that the family doctor knew nothing, that she had fixed everything, and that she was eternally grateful. To show how grateful she was she pelted into the back room and took her clothes off in a great hurry. I am fond of Bella. I tried to oblige her out of politeness.

I suppose you have understood. I found out quite by accident that Suzanne was acquainted with Casimir. I saw her once, after she left me, go towards his door. I imagined that Casimir, idiot that I was, for what ground could I conceivably have, was the 'unpleasant, undesirable person' of Bella's fears. That Casimir, and no other, was the putative father of the child that I was busy getting rid of. The child I would have so greatly desired, and so greatly desired from that young girl of sixteen…

Once more, irony has overtaken me. For when, the last time, I asked Bella to come and see me, in order to satisfy myself that no effort had been made at blackmailing her, I asked, in a casual turn of phrase, whether she had seen anything of Suzanne's past snare.

"Oh that, no, no, thank heaven," she said quite airily. "A young man called Simons whom I've never even seen, but from all I've ever heard I felt quite sure was objectionable. Suzanne's quite got over that, at least."

Suzanne? I have never seen Suzanne since. I think she regarded me as a catharsis for the whole episode. Looking back now, I feel sure that she knew all along that I was employing means to abort her. And, even, that her mother had sent her to me for that express purpose. I would not be in the least surprised, now, to learn that the very thought of me made her sick.

I think, Inspector, that this episode comes under the heading of criminal conversation. Don't you? I am not proud of it.

And poor old Casimir. I should have told him simply to go to hell. With his tape recorder and his cheap binoculars and his eavesdropping. And every word he uttered giving him away for the mangy old dog he had become. Nobody would have listened to him for a second. I had not the slightest need to stamp on him in that frenzied way. Obliterating a poor harmless old bugger whose simple

pleasure was gazing at the windows opposite, where typists changing their frocks after work can sometimes be espied in their underclothes. He was not as much of a criminal as I was.

A thought has just struck me. I think, now, that Casimir hated me, and for the identical reason that I hated him. I think that in his espials he had seen Suzanne leave my house. Knowing what he already did I think he jumped to the conclusion that I had seduced her. I think that he may have loved her, in much the same ridiculous, absurd way that I did – and do – myself.

In killing Casimir, did I kill myself?

Thirteen

I am sitting up in the top-floor flat, quite alone, in Casimir's studio. It looks almost as if the summer had died suddenly, violently, for it is cold, and rain is beating fiercely on the windows. I understand that the little gas fire would not have heated the studio enough in winter. It makes, too, a tiresome hissing sound, and I have preferred to light Casimir's oilstove. I have had to shut the windows, and the paraffin makes the room stuffy and smelly. I am changing: a month ago it would have been impossible for my fastidious nose to remain five minutes in a room with the thing. Now I am almost enjoying it. I have always had a sensitive nose, even as a child…

Now I had resolved to have none of that. I had determined to avoid this imagined psychoanalytic claptrap whereby scarring episodes of childhood and youth are presented with a flourish in novels. With the author, the fool, clapping himself upon the back in self-congratulation and saying 'How clever I am' as he presents some worthless fiction as a justification for the unreality, the pretentiousness, the imbecilities which the worthless poltroon knows, uneasily, have filled his print-wasting pages.

There is truth in it though, alas. There are episodes in one's childhood that one always remembers. And they can be so trivial. Why should one remember them, if it were not that one knows they left a permanent mark? Ach, knows; what does one ever really know? Still, I am as detached as any man. And since I said in my last instalment that there were things I now wished to show you, to allow you to draw your own conclusions – I do not pretend or wish to 'explain' anything at all – so be it, then.

I doubt, in fact, whether anyone can really pinpoint with accuracy the hours or days that later gave direction to his character. I fancy though that anybody with training can give some indications. Take this rain, now. It is a summer's day, although the fine weather has been broken off like a branch struck by the summer lightning. Heavy rain is falling out of an overcast sky, with a fairly strong westerly wind and a temperature around fourteen degrees. The day before just such a one – there may have been sun then or there may have been cloud; I do not recall – I went to school, aged seven, in the neat, tree-lined, clean streets of the provincial town of my childhood. Recall that there were no buses then with automatic doors but primitive-looking trains with open platforms. It was our pride, as children, to finish the ride on the bottom step and hop off thirty or forty metres before the train ground to a stop. The bigger children gauged with

absolute precision the speed at which they could jump as against the chance of being taken by the ear in the grimy fingers of an elderly conductor and pinned until the train stopped altogether – a disgrace this, though it could happen to anybody. Rather like the paratrooper colonel Langlais, who broke an ankle in the first jump over Dien Bien Phu! Indeed the bigger children had to us, the seven-year-olds, all the glamour of paratroopers. I had never dared jump, myself, and had perforce cravenly to wait with a group of other timid tinies, till the old tram had lurched to its standstill. One morning – this morning – I jumped, and at a speed that only lordly eleven-year-olds could attempt. I was determined, you see, to 'get my wings'.

I had, however, never grasped the trick of the three or four rapid pattering steps in the wake of the momentum. I leapt out at right angles, stumbled erratically, gyratically, through bewildering space, tripped over the gutter, and tumbled on the pavement, my head coming hard against a tin litter-box, and fortunately not the ornate cast-iron lamp-post to which it was wedded. Several sympathetic middle-aged women picked me up, and brought me into the nearest shop, where a kindly butcher deposited me on a slab and poured cold water on me. I came to and was violently sick.

"Oh, the poor lamb," said all the women, a thing they would never have said to the other lamb, hanging above me on a hook.

"He'll be all right," said the butcher soothingly. "Where d'you live, sonny?"

I suppose I told. The butcher, possessor of a Citroën delivery van (yes, it was a Citroën, I recall it perfectly) deposited me on some cleanish sacks smelling only slightly of blood, so that it may have been the smell of sacking that promptly made me sick again, and brought me home, where my dear mother flapped about rather. The butcher calmed her down, doubtless, and she recalled that she had recently followed a grandiose First-Aid-To-The-Wounded Course. (Evening classes were organised in the singularly gloomy urine-scented building of the lyceum, even more petrifying after twilight, but adults, I had remarked, were indifferent to such things.) She diagnosed concussion, quite sensibly, wound me in wet compresses, gave internal treatment of linden-tea-and-Aspro, and put me into bed.

Our house at the time was a large pompous villa – I was ten or so before we got 'poor'. It had turrets and gables, stood in a quiet heavy street where all the shopping was brought by errand-boys, and had a garden with evergreen oaks and a copper beech. It was called, of course, 'The Beeches'. Firmly in the plural, according to the current snobbery that a suburban villa was a townsman's country mansion.

(The house next door was called ‘Normandie’ and on the other side ‘Montreux’ – and both had tennis-courts.) I had, being the youngest, the only son, and a great treasure, a room of my own; the ‘tower’, which had two lancet windows and an octagonal shape.

Next day – the day it rained - I was kept in bed. I had a very slight headache and was otherwise in rude health. After my dear mother had fussed about with bread-and-milk and tip-toed out, I sat up. I wolfed the two dry rusks that had been left me, abolished the beastly cold compresses, and reached for a book. I spent there, with the rain hammering upon the tiles and windows of the turret – my crow’s nest – the happiest day of my life. Quite alone, in a warm ecstatic nest, thinking occasionally, between more highly coloured fantasies, of all the other little boys, suffering in their inky smelly classroom with the opaque globular lampshades that spread an acrid stink of heated dust. I hated and dreaded school.

I was a fidgety child, frail and timid. I was quick at reading and spelling, and had always the ‘recitation’ and the verses by heart while the class was still struggling with the first line and a half up-to-the-semicolon. But figures were a nightmare to me. To this day I am flummoxed by nine sevens and seven eights. The decimal point was to me a maniac dot, invented by scholarly sadists. It flitted about among the rows of noughts, utterly uncomprehended, and poisoned my life. The classical ‘passage from one ten to another’ pushed me with contempt and derision to the bottom of the school, and I suffered. What would have been my lot had I had to wrestle like an English child with pounds, shillings and pence?

Every day we had a ‘maxim’. This was a pious thought written first thing every morning by the master, in superb flowing longhand at the very top of the blackboard, and it stayed there till the following morning, when it was erased with hieratic gestures by a long hairy hand projecting from a grimy flannel cuff and the shiny sleeve of a soutane, holding a thing like a clothes-brush, but that had a sort of pad instead of bristles. I can still see it, sewn in a blue-and-white swiss roll of some woolly dishcloth material.

When we did our homework we had to write at the top of the page, very neatly, name and christian name, date, the Jesuit motto A.M.D.G., and this ‘maxim’ which we were trained to copy into our rough-books the moment it appeared. I fought, even then, an instinctive war against all maxims, and did this with the greatest distaste. My writing was uncontrolled and sprawling, and I always lost marks for imperfect transcription of those ornate flourishes signalling a capital letter’s dreaded approach.

Horror – one winter evening I found that I had forgotten the maxim, and without it my homework would receive an inexorable zero. It was that kind of educational system: work counted for nothing if the seven-year-old were not thoroughly impregnated with some literary nun's corrections of Bernadette Soubirous' solid good sense.

My mother was adamant. Back I had to go, under wet dripping ghastly trees, through the black echoing 'playground' past reeking dark sheds (lavatories, in the dark the gas chambers of Auschwitz) into a building that was still open, because at the other end the big boys were still getting instruction hammered into their dirty ears. I crept into an empty classroom, lit by an economical fifteen-watt bulb in the passage, and found that maxim, smug and imbecile on its blackboard, and ran like a fury home, in hysterical tears long before I reached 'The Beeches'.

Next morning I got a zero after all. I had looked in Class Two.

Fourteen

It must have been a year later, and in Class Two, that I was so terrified at not knowing my tables that one day I never went to school at all. I left the house, naturally, at the given time, my satchel on my back. But I spent the whole day lying concealed in the belt of rhododendrons by the front gate, trembling as the baker's boy banged along the path whistling, a foot from my head, but unsuspected and undiscovered, the whole blessed day. I was immensely proud of this achievement, and my confidence lent me a fluent mendacity when I said at school I had had to go to the dentist. I repeated the trick twice, that year. I did not suffer from those hours lying in damp leafmould. Indeed no prison would appear to me brutal, no guard severe, even now.

From the age of seven, children who misbehaved were not punished with a tweak to the ear or even a back-hander in class, but were sent formally with a chit to the Prefect of Discipline, an aged tyrant who walked endlessly around the playground with his breviary. In the top class of the preparatory department, aged eleven and bold with beginnings of muscle and pubic hair, we maintained that inside the pages of the breviary he really had cowboy stories, folded small.

When a child reached this chalky old gentleman with one of the chits (there was no means of evasion, since after execution a second chit was given, to be handed to the master originator of the court-martial) he would slip the cowboy stories into a side pocket of the soutane, read the chit severely, and motion the criminal towards his office, a bleak little room embellished with an extraordinary ornate rolltop desk. This walking to the office was the worst part of the punishment. For children as for adults the leisureliness of justice carries the real sting.

Out of a back pocket, for those soutanes were ingeniously designed for the carriage of concealed weapons (and in the sleeves were stuffed large dirty clerical handkerchiefs) he then produced a Jesuit invention, most painstakingly manufactured and well finished, officially called a ferula. It was a shiny thing of black stitched leather, something like the sole of a narrow shoe in shape, rather elegant, flexible and springy as a Negro athlete. One then held out one's hand for Twice Two or Twice Four, according to the gravity of the offence. Some recommended holding the hand limp and hollow, others keeping stiff and brave; the methods were equally painful. Maximum in theory was Twice Nine, but there were dread tales of even dreader

beatings. I was beaten frequently, being dreamy, inattentive, fidgety, often disrespectful, and occasionally really wicked, as witness the time when I discovered that by swallowing quantities of air I could presently send the whole class into hysterics by loud emissions of wind. I got Twice Six for Disrespect, Creating Disturbance, Obscenity, and the grave crime known I believe to the army as Dumb Insolence. I was also beaten frequently for lying.

We measure time in decades: one is infant till ten, child till twenty, youth till thirty. After that one is just man for thirty years, until one's sixtieth birthday and, I suspect, the beginnings of wisdom and decrepitude hand in hand. At ten years old I got from my father my first fountain pen, rather superior, black with a rolled-gold clip. Rolled gold sounds good but means, I believe, some cheap plating process. To a child, it is very fine.

I had surmounted the initial stage of a Jesuit school - Preparatory, Elements, and Figures. I was in Rudiments, and before me lay Grammar, and the superior school, the names of whose classes I have forgotten, save two which were beautiful: Poetry, and

Philosophy. In Grammar I met the one sympathetic action I was to encounter from the teaching staff throughout my whole school days, indeed the one action approaching intelligence.

I had the highest marks in the class, consistently, save for one boy, a Jewish boy called Gold. I have no idea why he was sent to a Catholic school, though he had bright blond hair and a muscular Aryan exterior that would have pleased Heinrich Himmler. Certainly he made no effort to deny or conceal his Jewishness. He was good at gymnastics, for which I envied him bitterly; to me gymnastics – those dread bars, those ropes, those harsh coconut mats, that smell of feet and carbolic – were hell. I could box, though, much to my surprise, and Gold and I – the children called him Fish, of course – fought furiously. Once he knocked half my left ear loose, and I still feel the tiny welt. He was, you will understand, my friend.

His parents were rich, and he turned up one day with a French dictionary, so new, shiny and delectable that I was eaten up by the desire for it. I stole it, thinking that its newness made it untraceable. Alas the master, investigating, found Gold's name, written after the fashion of children very small, in pencil, at the extreme inside bottom corner of the back cover. I will always remember that master. He said nothing in public at all. He made me go quietly to Fish, admit my theft, and give back the dictionary. And he gave me another, as new, as shiny, he had himself gone out to buy in the midday break.

I have said that this man was the one teacher with intelligence.

That seems harsh, but I encountered in the superior classes nothing but a dull pedantry. There was nothing whatever to give a child the slightest pleasure in anything, outside the curriculum or in it. For a Jesuit school it must have been a very bad one. I recall little of those years, save ludicrous episodes like the embarrassed cleric and Victor Hugo. I remained good at languages and bad at algebra. I got prizes at the end of the year (of the genre Southey's *Life of Nelson*) and reprimands for not being able to trace the exact outline of Charlemagne's empire upon the map of Europe. I made frequent penitential excursions to the office of the Prefect of Discipline, and others to the Prefect of Studies, where the torment, though not corporal, was just as disagreeable and lasted much longer. I would be told here that my parents paid reduced fees, and Made Sacrifices, and that Consequently…

We were doing *Booz endormi,* an example favoured by pedants for illustrating Hugo's less-ranting manner, and had got to the line where Ruth is asleep with her breasts bare.

"Seins," said the pedant, mumbling, "means – uh…"

"Breasts," said Gold, who had a sophisticated home life.

"Bosoms," suggested some other urchin.

"Tits," sotto voce at the back; some overgrown child with a huge dirty wink at various fifteen-year-olds corrupt in an innocent and fumbling way.

"Chest," said the pedant firmly, searching in his sleeve for a handkerchief. "Chest," defiantly. Fish kicked me under the desk, I sniggered, and was immediately sent to the Prefect for judgement.

I recall nothing of my lyceum years but trashy French verse. 'Oh combien de marins, combien de capitaines' and the poetry for housemaids by Alfred de Musset. Was there no French prose? I suppose that there were approved authors, like Chateaubriand. Of English literature I recall the dreary set pieces by Lamb and Hazlitt with titles like 'A Cold Morning' (somebody warming a razor in his bosom, surely an extraordinary notion) or 'On Going a Journey'. English poetry seems in retrospect to have been suppressed along with the French prose, but it was that kind of school. Those worthy and excellent clerics – one is reminded of Stendhal's tutor, the Abbé de Raillane.

Fifteen

It must mean something that Ruth's bosoms stuck so fast to this capricious memory. I was certainly the kind of child described by Raillane-tutors as 'prurient'. I was precocious, nervous, easily touched by the sensual. My mother, going through a Life Beautiful phase just after the Kaiser's War, had many elaborate books. It is the illustrations by Rackham and Dulac, rather than the splendid *Don Quichotte* by Doré, that I recall. Hawthorne's *Wonder Book,* or the *Ring of the Nibelungen,* with endless flexible naked little girls: all these illustrators must have had a bit of a Lewis Carroll complex. I recall one of these books vividly, called *The Earthly Paradise*- or some such name. It was bad verse which I never read, but each page was accompanied by a large arty photograph in the pearly halftones of the period. All were of naked pre-pubescent girls on a beach, playing little games with sand and reeds and shells, the mysterious shadows between these children's slim elegant thighs photographed with loving attention. Did these pictorial Annabelles and Lolitas give me a taste for rounded women in their late thirties? No, Henry; no explanations.

My memories of my father are vague. He was a big, robust man, who had made a lot of money as a mining engineer in Indonesia. There he had injured his health, maybe as a consequence of rheumatic fever. Certainly he had also a recurrent tropical malady that laid him up at intervals in a black depression. I think he may have been furious at his muscular body letting him down.

I was born in Indonesia, but within three years we were all brought back to Holland. My sisters, much older than myself, would talk about the wonderful life, but no colourful or uninhibited memory, no word of Malay disturbs my placid Dutch childhood. My father had wealth placed in mines of various kinds, and we lived, as I have said, in a large hideous villa suitable to a well-off rentier. I recall glass cases of geological specimens and others with daggers and shields, bellicose handwork of Dyaks or some such, less dull but with which I was not allowed to play. I recall the garden, damp and gloomy with overgrown laurel and rhododendron, and a house also damp and gloomy with stained glass that lent mahogany and pampas grass a churchy feeling surely depressing to others as well as me, but nobody did anything about it.

My father's shares lost value steadily during the depression. My mother, who dramatised most things, was fond of saying that we were as poor as rats, and that we should be on the street in our shirts

at any moment. I cannot recall our suffering the slightest hardship. We never got to bread-and-marge-and-cocoa, like most. But the house was sold, certainly at a huge loss, and we moved to a small poky house in a new, rather 'working-class' district. I think my father suffered. He used to go out into the country, such as it was: splendid farming ground but flat and featureless. The polder, and on one side the sand dunes, were no substitute to him for the forest, the jungle.

I think that he was a nice person, because he made botanical drawings, a few of which I still possess. He would take a little sketch pad, and draw field flowers. At home he did these over, exactly, minutely, in Indian ink and water-colour, and wrote all the names he could discover underneath in his printed engineer's script. They are quite clumsy and naïve but there is devotion in them.

My mother was a nice person too. You will notice the strange distance between me and my parents. Affection I had, and affection I returned, but there was always a gap of which I was aware.

She was a very pretty, gushing, talkative woman, from a family of important colonial administrators; an uncle had been a Governor General. She had greatly lost caste in her family by becoming converted to Catholicism; she swam in emotional fervour with all a convert's uncritical joy. She had plenty of intelligence and much charm, marred by a certain tiresome silliness. She crowded the houses with bondieuserie – pious pictures and holy-water stoups covered in sugar angels. She had a very showy missal, and a terrible rosary of wood from the Mount of Olives, blessed, it was said, by a Pope, of which she was very vain. She poisoned my life with sentimental child saints – well-born of course, like Aloysius Gonzaga or Guy de Fontgallant – and invited curates to the house for glasses of sherry.

Once we were poor she maintained herself with innocent snobberies. She could not of course cook or do housekeeping, and that was not her fault, surrounded as her whole life had been with a flock of servants, but unwittingly she made me suffer. Hardship, I have said, there was none, but suffering there was. I was sent to the most expensive school. My sisters had been to expensive convents, but had finished, being much older, before the depression really made itself felt. They were now independent, with their own friends, and cared little. I was small and fragile, much mothered and babied, and had no such defences. I was sent to school in the cheapest clothes. My companions played tennis, but we were too 'poor' to afford a tennis racket. They had expensive bicycles; I had none.

They went for holidays, which we could not afford. Their clothes

were elegant and their shoes of supple leather. I was sent to school in boots, and my mother was proud of the economies thus accomplished. Some of these things bit very deep. I have never forgiven that tennis racket. Or the shapeless cotton swimming-shorts, that when wet hung on my shanks like paper, outlining my extremely self-conscious penis, causing sniggers from children with solid wool shorts that had badges of swimming-clubs stitched on them. Occasionally the kind mother of a rich comrade – Mrs Gold – would invite me for a free afternoon or even a day at weekends. My mother made me accept these invitations, quite rightly but inconsistently, and I see myself still climbing into the Golds' big luscious Talbot auto, wearing boots, clutching my cotton shorts, agonising. Fish himself was much too nice a boy to comment, and Mrs Gold, and the chuckling, cigar-smoking Papa Gold, who dealt in furs, showered me with kindnesses. But other children remarked with their natural cruelty upon my mother's petty snobberies and pettier economies.

My father did not notice such things. He had himself plenty of clothes, old but good for a lifetime. When on my twelfth birthday I begged and prayed for a bike he gave me one, and saw that it should be a good one. I think it is because of that bike and the rolled-gold fountain pen that I remember my father, quite unjustly really, with more kindness than my mother. She could be extremely kind, but I wished sometimes that she would go to heaven with Guy de Fontgallant – a little boy as I recall from an exceedingly wealthy and snobbish family – and leave me in peace.

I was not allowed to make friends with poorer children who wore boots, whom my mother said had common accents and very likely ringworm.

With girls, of course, I had no contact whatever. Girls did not approach expensive Jesuit schools. I was eighteen and had won a scholarship to the university before I met and spoke with a girl of my age. That, van der Valk, must seem extraordinary, and unlikely, to you, but I assure you that it is so.

In fact I seem, on looking over these pages, to get a slightly bitter taste. That is fair, for I had, despite many solitary pleasures, an unnecessarily harassed and painful childhood.

There is a sense of needless stupidity in that combination of 'standing' and cheese-paring, as there was in my father's dislike of bothering himself punctuated with bits of sudden, perhaps shame-stricken generosity. Certainly all that widened the gap.

My father died in my first year at the university. He had quarrelled, I believe, with his family, of whom I recall nothing but a

portentous bearded brother and a faded sister at the funeral. I felt little emotion, perhaps a vague pity. The gap had got too wide. I could spare only one day away from lectures and from Amsterdam.

My mother went to live with her sister, my aunt Mathilde, in Voorburg, just outside The Hague: my aunt's husband, regarded as a high candidate for colonial honours, had died in Djakarta in administrative service while quite young. Really my mother did this to get back to the atmosphere where she felt at home; the sisters drank tea and talked about the good old days, with their friends, for Voorburg is full of pensioned colonial widows as well as old gentlemen who have retired, as full of honours as their houses are of tiger-skins and Balinese dolls. But I was given to understand that this was done out of altruism, to save every penny and further my education. I was not impressed, nor particularly grateful. I lived in a respectable lodging house – how well I remember it – in Amsterdam, near the Museum, in the Jan Luykenstraat. I had henceforward money for books, a few clothes, and even some cheap amusements if I cared to discover any.

I had been sent to the university to study humanities – Arts, as the faculty is named, pleasantly but vaguely. For my teachers had said that languages living and dead were my only real strength. True to principle my mother had not the remotest idea of steering me towards some career that would earn me a living. Nor had I; so little notion of reality had I at eighteen that I planned to get a 'good degree' and enter the Diplomatic Service.

Fish, still the only friend I had, despised 'Arts' though even better at the disciplines than I was: I was throughout school the eternal second to him. He was going to read medicine, and it was at his house, halfway through my first year, in the first flush of independence, that I was bitten by the bug. Theo Visser, then professor of materia medica, had come to dinner, and after a very good meal, Mrs Gold's excellent coffee, Papa's wonderful Cuban cigars, and armagnac brandy, old Theo got so lyrical about medicine – the two boys sitting enraptured, both mouths slightly open – that I determined then and there to change over. Forgotten the good degree in languages and the Diplomatic Service. I dawdled out the rest of the academic year reading all the medical books I could lay my hands on, went to no more lectures than were necessary in order not to get sacked altogether, and at the beginning of the next semester, to my mother's anguish, I plunged into 'pre-medical'.

That was the year of Munich. Papa Gold, no fool, was settled in Canada three months later, and Fish, my only anchorage, with him.

Mrs Gold cried a little when I went to say goodbye. She was fond of me, and I think understood me well enough. She gave me a cheque for a hundred pounds – a hundred pounds! – from her own account, and Papa gave me a signet ring which I still wear. Fish volunteered three years later for the Canadian Army. He was killed in Holland, ironically, just at the time of the Liberation. I never saw him, though I was in Amsterdam throughout the whole war.

There you are, van der Valk, my boy. You will be, I think, in your late thirties – old enough to remember the years before Munich and the years of the depression, the years when things like schools were extraordinarily old-fashioned in comparison with other countries, the last years of Holland's long isolation, and comfortable prosy dozy sleep that was to end only in the violent breaking-in of reality in the May days of nineteen forty.

But we may as well go on, and even perhaps get all this thrashed out in one sitting. Beatrix is expecting me for dinner, but I do not intend to go. I am proposing to do what I have never done, instead. I am going to eat at a cheap 'lunch-room' restaurant, where there is music and a huge menu full of strange things, and people order the oddest combinations, like cold Russian egg salad with fried potatoes. They are open till late at night. I think I shall enjoy this. I will take a pocket book with me – a Simenon, for instance – and read it at the table, and drink beer. What on earth would anyone say who knew me, to see Doctor van der Post, who has certainly as high an income as any specialist in Holland, sitting in a lunch-room at ten at night, eating Russian eggs with chips, drinking beer and reading a Simenon printed on lavatory paper, rested on his plate's edge?

What would you say?

Would it please you to see me rub shoulders with the people of Amsterdam, those very 'people' my mother found rather shocking? You are one of them yourself. You see, I am not so stupid after all.

My youth, yes. The twentieth birthday, big landmark. I was halfway through 'pre-med' and worried at not losing my virginity. In these days, no boy has any difficulty finding a girl of his own age to sleep with. In England they wear little badges, these girls, to proclaim their accessibility, and have contraceptives in their schoolbags. You recall, the yellow golliwogs? – rather a poetic conception. Or contraception, as you prefer.

But then… Any town more provincial and puritan than the prewar Amsterdam is difficult to imagine. To find a girl to go to bed with, even at twenty, smoking a big pipe and using ridiculous medical jargon, was a formidable undertaking.

Naturally, there was the old quarter. It is nowadays a tourist attraction. Any young girl, even alone, can walk giggling through narrow alleys, peering with a greedy choky sensation at the 'girls behind the windows'. And any boy with a pound note in his pocket can push the door and see the 'girl' of his choice get up bored to draw the curtain, putting down her book or her knitting with a sigh, languidly undoing her skirt, fumbling at the zipper with her free hand already held out for her money.

But before the war, you must know, the old quarter was a place of terror and legend. Nobody well-brought-up dreamed of going near it. Even policemen went there in couples. There were tales of drunken seamen robbed and knifed by a banditry that went to ground in the rabbit-warren of attics and cellars. Legend went further. In the minute, stinking alleyways there was cholera and sleeping sickness, and in those attics where, opening a tiny window, you might get a breath of tropical scents there were even, it was whispered, lepers hidden. Amsterdam, recall, was the great European port for the Far East, the visible, tangible, smellable link with Holland's empire, which was a tropical archipelago the size of the United States.

In fact, even as medical students, puffed with bravado, we shook in our shoes when we first came to the Binnen Gasthuis, the old hospital that stands still on the demarcation line between the old quarter and the prim city, and has fingers, and toes, that are dabbled in the blood and pus of both.

There were women students, of course. Fewer than now, but quite a huddle in the literature and history faculties. They were mostly plain, with spots and stringy hair, and tended to come from earnest provincial families. They were stiff and proper, and lived boarded out with an uncle in the big city. Two, however, met my standards, which were exacting.

For I was a great admirer of beauty. A devotion to the senses, to the curving sweeping line, to nineteenth-century romanticism. Music as yet I knew nothing of. (My family was, in retrospect, strangely philistine. My mother, a great talker about books and pictures, never once took me to a concert or a gallery.) Books, however, there had always been in the house, and during my last lyceum years I had discovered Wilde and Beardsley, the Bakst and Benois designs for the Russian Ballet, the nudes of Titian and Giorgione, the verse of Théophile Gautier, and I was something of an adolescent aesthete. These two girls came within the definition of what was acceptable to such.

Marie was blonde, with a little tilted nose, quiet and neat, and

rode on an expensive bicycle from her parents' superior residence near the Zoo. Father was some departmental secretary in the municipal administration, a functionary of quite a grand sort. Marie was very much a little Sainte N'y Touche, her nose somewhat in the air. She was conscientious, went to all lectures, and took careful notes in a neat but stupid rounded backhand. I sat just behind her, did my best to smell her hair, and dared say no word to her.

Alida I admired less; she was less well shaped. Taller, a little clumsier, with a suspicion of hair on upper lip and sturdy calves as well as her strong forearms. She had long brown hair with a reddish tinge, strong black eyebrows, long greenish eyes that gave vitality to her face, and a very pretty mouth. She may have been the only girl in the university to wear lipstick, then thought distinctly fast and decidedly common. She came indeed very nearly from the 'people' and lived in a flat-chested apartment at the very limit of Amsterdam-South, a district only just built.

I followed Marie home after daring, after some abject failures, to speak some conventional greeting, to which she replied politely with a pleasant smile. And one weekend I dressed myself as killingly as I knew, polished shoes and hair, more or less with the same product, and knocked trembling at her door. She opened it herself to my relief, looking surprised. I stuttered out some lame suggestion for the cinema; she looked even more surprised.

"Oh… Well I'd like to, very much, but I'm afraid no, thank you, I can't." I must have looked stupefied as well as unhappy. "I'm afraid my father wouldn't let me. I'm afraid I have to go now." She shut the door hastily, and I fled, discomfited. I never got the little mystery solved, since Marie continued to smile politely and say good morning, and even asked once for details of some missed lecture. The fluster may have been due to the cinema, or to my being Catholic, for I was of good family, presentable, less awkward thanks to the Golds, not too grindingly poor, and not at all a wild student. However, both the cinema and the Catholicism might have made me untouchable to the sort of strait-laced bourgeois family by no means uncommon then in North Holland.

I now saw Alida in a different light, and was not discouraged for long. I now saw Marie as a trifle insipid, and Alida seemed less earthy to my fastidious eye, and the lines of her figure were athletic…

I did not, after my rebuff, ring at any more doors, but I hung around her district at night, saw her occasionally running errands, and discovered her father to be a head buyer in the big department store in the town, from which came her slightly loud winter coat and

smart cheap shoes. That shop had Catholic management, and some of the Protestants refused to buy there, despite the wide choice and low prices.

I did not pluck up the courage to speak till a lucky day when we asked simultaneously at the reading-room desk for the same book - Brunetière, I recall. I was as astonished to find myself a success with Alida as a senator from Mississippi would be to wake up and find himself President. She was simple and spontaneous. She never made me feel stupid or awkward; on the contrary, with her I felt an easy companionship. We sat in the park on sunny days, went rather hot and sticky to the cinema, and took long walks through the streets during the last nights of the last pre-war summer. Our pleasures were very simple, and as simply I loved her.

Of course to trace the course of all this in detail would be very boring. But in my youth as in my childhood there are salient moments which you will notice.

The pension in the Jan Luykenstraat, which was proper, and where no girl would have been allowed, was clearly impossible, and with 'adult' daring I moved to another, scruffier, much gayer, where the food was much worse but the company much better; where, indeed, I stayed throughout my student days. Everybody had his own pot of jam, with a label stuck to it, and one frequently put one's feet through tears in the sheets.

Dear Mrs Koning, who lived all day in the basement with her fat musical daughter Naomi, and who permanently wore an amazing hat with cloth parma violets on it, with a stain on her lip from her inseparable cigarette that lived in that corner of her talkative, friendly, vague mouth! I can recall, too, all my fellow lodgers. Mister Veldkamp, the schoolmasters in *The Lanchester Tradition,* his air with a dark curly hair, a thick mouth, and black-rimmed glasses, who was sensitive to draughts and preferred, like the schoolmasters in *The Lanchester Tradition,* his air with a bouquet. Miss Obbema, a desiccated woman with bifocals, fiftyish, who had 'her' cushion, 'her' chair, and a conviction that people stole her jam. Astonishingly, she was an artist. Even more astonishing, an artist in stained glass and, I believe, a good one. Both she and Mister Veldkamp were very orthodox and quoted the Bible frequently.

In opposition was Billy Kol, a medical student in his fourth year, old for his age and for his class. He was an atheist, a great fusspot, especially about his own health, and anticlerical to annoy the 'clerical party', whom he fought by stealing their jam, hiding their cushions, and sneakily opening windows behind the dusty plush

curtains. He wore glasses, but was constantly leaving them off because of a lunatic theory that his eyes would get too dependent on them.

And the girls… Margie, who called herself Juana and was the mistress of – yes, Casimir, then possessor of a large reputation. Anyway she claimed that she was his mistress, though she hardly left the house, where she stayed in bed all day reading and eating sweets. And Evelyn… But I am anticipating. The point of the move to the Stadthouderskade, a stone's throw from the Jan Luyken but mysteriously lower in standing, was to get Alida into the house. For we all had our own keys here, and came in at all hours, because of Mrs Koning's aversion to ever leaving the basement.

With the first romantic tendernesses worn smooth, my boy's sensuality was stirred by Alida. To help me in getting her clothes off, a thing I was not exactly practised in, I called in Art. Her coltish body scarcely fitted the illustrations to *Salome* that were my ideal at the time, but I had at least understood that the female nude body is beautiful, made beautiful by an erotic element. After a good deal of argument along the lines of 'how would any painter ever have managed…' a shy, trembly, awkward Alida stripped in the second-floor back, left of the landing, myself just as stricken by these adjectives, with sweat between the shoulders.

I had water-colours, which I tried to use like oils, being in love with vivid colour. I made bad pencil sketches with wandering lines and a most medical lack of anatomical knowledge, and coloured them rather well, with splendid green shadows. Poor Alida! Perched in great discomfort on my bed, in the pose of Manet's 'Olympia', a facial expression as though the worn rug under her were redhot! My eyes must have burned fiercely upon her juvenile figure; she fidgeted all the time despite entreaties and insisted on dressing after ten minutes, so bothered that she forgot to tell me to turn away and I sat biting my fingers.

Ach, I wore her down, of course. When naked she threatened to scream if I came near her, but there was a lot of moist breathing at other times, and I succeeded every now and then in boring past rather pathetic schoolgirl underclothes with tight elastic, that would appear highly laughable to, let us say, Suzanne, today.

My youthful virility never penetrated poor Alida's confused and tormented body. Once switched to another department of the university – and the Medical Faculty was in another part of the town – and hard at work, my interest in Alida ebbed. For I was good at even pre-medicine, and was in the top two per cent of my classes

throughout, however childish and confused my emotions. I imagined, being full of valuable pre-medical catch-phrases, that she was 'half-virgin' and therefore despicable, whereas the poor child would have made a good companion to anyone less gauche than myself.

It was not, of course, only Alida that disappointed my longing for female flesh. My first efforts towards another goal were aimed at the ineffable Juana.

Margie was a figure of comedy in many ways. She had a plump, puppyish face and figure, poker-straight long pale-brown hair that flowed casually about her, and immense good nature. The hateful Obbema and the prig Veldkamp loathed her, and complained all day of this slut to Mrs Koning, who took no notice, let alone throwing her out as demanded. She must have had hidden sympathy for the girl, who was indeed thoroughly nice if stupid, and had no notion why anyone should dislike her. She spent hours in the bathroom, and would sail out smiling gently at the furious 'next', bundled in an absurd peignoir and showing lots of exuberant bosom when she dropped her toothbrush, which she always did. Her room was a perfect sight, and the maids gave up any effort to clean it one after another; there was a sort of huge turn-out about once a month. In between it overflowed with dirty stockings – real silk, very grand for those days – showy but draughty knickers known to saleswomen as 'French', bits of embroidery that never got finished, knitting for which the pattern had got lost, toffee-papers, and coffee-cups with the dregs gone hard in the bottom. The walls were hung with large charcoal drawings, presumably the work of Casimir, of a very naked and fleshy Juana, which she could spend hours admiring. When the door was open – and it always was – one was hit every time one passed by these huge eyefuls. Juana washing her neck (good heavens, what sacrifices for art), three-quarter back, Juana brushing her hair, one-quarter profile, Juana couchant, passant, rampant, and apparently needing to be naked whatever her activity. She was only slightly less naked in real life, and her favourite costume was a flappy pair of 'beach pyjama' trousers, fashion of somewhere around nineteen thirty-seven, with hibiscus blossoms on them, and a cardigan back to front, somewhat shrunk, outlining massive breasts with impudent menacing nipples, and precariously held by two buttons somewhere in the spine, generally in the wrong buttonholes.

However flaunted it might be, I got nowhere in my efforts to reach all this abundance. Margie got shrieks of giggles when I screwed up courage, drinking coffee in her room, to poke a finger at some plump curve, and hit me disagreeably on the knuckles with a hairbrush. But she remained generous with toffees and paperbound novels, and huge

wafts of over-scented face-powder, till the war made all these goodies unobtainable.

The war brought a straitening of my circumstances – that money of my father's invested in Indonesia… Suddenly I had half the amount I was accustomed to live on. Mrs Koning was unperturbed, and let me have one of the tiny attic rooms where the maids had formerly slept, very much under the eaves and with walls composed, as far as one could make out, of a few rough wooden posts connected by seventeen or eighteen layers of cheap wallpaper stuck together. There were no more maids, for the lumpish and reddened fruits of the backwoods now stayed there, sensibly; there was more to eat. Naomi still trotted to the conservatoire every morning with her violin in its case, and did the housework in the afternoons, helped by another girl, some classmate. Mrs Koning slept in her treasure-cave, where she kept rice and bacon, oatmeal and brown sugar – and managed to keep it an amazingly long time. The rice got pretty wormy towards the end, but one did not notice the beasts, said Billy cheerfully, since they stopped moving about once cooked…

Next door to me, in the other attic room, lived Evelyn. She was a law student, two or three years older than I was, and had always seemed aloof and rather adult. We had never seen much of her, because she was poor and did not eat with us at table, but had a spirit stove up in her eyrie to which Mrs Koning turned a kind blank eye. She was thin and pale, anaemic-looking, distinctly flat-breasted, with fearful salt-cellars at her collar-bones. I would never have got to know this bony beauty – for she had good features and fine ash-blonde hair – had it not been for the winter of 1941. Those attics… We heated bricks in the kitchen oven, put next morning's washing-water into stoneware gin-bottles, and collected all the old clothes we could rake up. My mother sent me all my father's old things, and I lived in a wonderful tweed Norfolk shooting-jacket, and at night under a camel overcoat with many moth-holes, but warm…

The night the oil froze in the German automatic weapons in Russia, Evelyn came into my room and asked awkwardly – she was blue with cold and her pinched face looked transparent – whether we could not unite our resources. It was nothing but the need of animal warmth that drove us into bed together.

Of her two great fears, becoming tubercular and becoming pregnant, Evelyn took the best precautions against the second. Never was I allowed to possess her, though it was understood between us that I could touch her as much as I cared to.

In forty-two the despised Mister Veldkamp was discovered to be a

resister, and to have been extremely brave, which shamed us. He was, we heard later, arrested trying to get away to England and, I presume, shot. In forty-three Juana, who had got pastier and fatter, was taken to hospital. A year later it was she, and not poor thin Evelyn, that died of tuberculosis. In forty-four, the hunger winter, there were fewer of us, and we were much better disposed towards each other, huddling together in Mrs Koning's kitchen, the last place in the house to stay warm. Obbema was the last to go. Jamless but undefeated, still quoting the Bible at Billy (a real doctor now), penniless and upright, she survived the war. By the kind of irony that one grew accustomed to, she was hit by a military lorry that skidded and mounted the pavement, a few days after the liberation. She died a few minutes later held up by her old enemy, while settling her bifocals back up between her ferocious eyes in a gesture familiar to us all.

Evelyn had gone before the hunger winter. She had family in Denmark, I think, and volunteered for some German workforce hoping to get up into Schleswig Holstein and cross the border there. We never heard from her.

It was in nineteen forty-four that I slept with a girl for the first time. She was blonde like Evelyn, thin and washed-out, with adenoids and a fearful Amsterdam accent, a prostitute in the old quarter. She was surprisingly gentle with me. I went to her twice, but the third time she had pneumonia and I had to be content with the dark girl who shared the room. She was friendly too but smelt, and had such a professional manner that I had a fiasco. Kay had been professional, but sensitive enough to see my predicament and be patient about it. She had smelt, to be sure, but with her I had at least accomplished what I longed for. Ludicrous, no?

In nineteen forty-six, my dear van der Valk, I became a licensed medical practitioner, and had had just the amount of experience with the female body that I have taken such pains to describe for you. I went through every stage, of collecting pornographic photographs, of reading the very tedious and unimaginative literature on the subject, of filling myself with fantasies about any girl I saw in the street whose skirt, perhaps, had stuck to her bicycle as she jumped off it, showing me a glimpse of thigh that would torment me for a week.

I am glad that my mother lived long enough to see me arrive at the threshold and the promise of a fine career. Life to her was such a simple affair that I am pleased that she had a quiet, simple death with no pain, convinced that now the war was over the life she had always known, centred on Government House in Batavia, would

resume the even tenor she had known, even if the ill-mannered boys and short-skirted girls of forty-five were not what she was accustomed to.

Old Theo Visser was long retired, but I called on him when we heard that David Gold was dead. He used all his influence among his friends and colleagues to get me a good job, and it was he that wangled the postgraduate course in England, where I learned about the neurological techniques bought with the war experiences. It was the first time I had ever been abroad, and I went off in high spirits, but the experience was unfortunate. I had always thought of England in terms of Rupert Brooke; I found the dismal uniformity that anyone will recall who lived in England during the reign of Sir Stafford Cripps. It was like Holland, with points and coupons and austerity. Like Holland, there were a great many forms to fill in after queuing for a considerable time. The subtle difference from Holland was, perhaps, dismaying, for the language of these forms was not the abrupt – not to say rude – menace of dire happenings if one failed to conform, long familiar to me. Nobody can excel a Dutch bureaucrat in composing the most formal and ponderous of sentences that yet contrives to be violently, personally, rude. What dismayed me in England was that the English forms were somehow like the English life, with a threadbare politeness and a false humility that I never understood. The summons, haughty and peremptory, to wait with bows and scrapes upon some petty functionary was signed 'Your obedient servant'! Being a Stranger, I found, made one automatically an Inferior. Still, I remember England with gratitude; it was there that I learned to go to concerts.

Youth ended, as it began, with a fiasco. At the end of my postgraduate course I went for my first real holiday – to Paris. I had money in my pocket, and a screwed-up sense of freedom. Alas, how provincial I felt myself. I had thought of my French as good, and discovered it to be pitiful. I had thought I would feel at home in Paris. Had I not often heard my parents recall happy times there? My mother had been to finishing-school there. Later she had shopped at Lanvin and Hermès in the Rue Saint Honoré. My father had been used to say that the only ties he could wear without feeling sick were those from Sulka. They had not felt as lumpish as I did.

More humiliations followed. I tried to get into an expensive restaurant and was told there was no table, fancying I could hear the aproned under-waiters snigger. I got into another, though, could not understand the menu, and was served a dish I could not digest, with a sauce of pounded shellfish and brandy I thought revolting. I ordered a half-bottle of wine; they brought me a whole one that I did

not know how to refuse. With my Dutch notions it seemed a crime to waste what had cost so much; I drank it all. I stumbled out somehow, and when the fresh air hit me outside I just vomited everything upon the pavement.

In hospitals I was competent. I was a doctor; I was even regarded as brilliant. Why did the two halves of my life seem to slip apart? Why, outside, did I feel bitterly that I was still the boy that in Paris had stared at the statues in the Luxembourg, and had been only reminded of childhood, and pictures of these statues, young girls by Rodin, that had pricked on that agonised wish to know, to possess, to understand these mystery-shrouded female figures?

Sixteen

I find I have stayed up, writing all this out – should I say spitting it all out? – till well after midnight. I have gone to bed here in my tower, in Casimir's eyrie, secure from interruption or irritation, but I cannot sleep. I have stirred too hard among dregs that I had thought settled and finally hardened. Muddy clouds have swirled to the surface and left me with an unexpected bitter aftertaste. It is pointless now to tear all this up. I yielded to some compulsion to scribble it all down – as though that could do me or anyone else any good – and now I will leave it.

But I will stop here. I am not, after all, going to tell you about my early manhood, about Beatrix and why I married her, how I came to acquire and build up this practice, how – or why – I began to seduce my female patients, nor about the unexpected, astonishing successes I have had in so doing. You will just have to use what wits you have.

Seventeen

You are continuing your quiet subterranean war. You have phoned up again for an appointment, I see by the book. Indeed, Miss Maas commented upon it.

"As far as I understand this is some police official. I rather think he's concealing whatever's wrong with him from his office people; he seems unwilling to accept appointments in advance, as though he were afraid of being found out." She smiled tolerantly. "I imagine he's putting on a good face in front of his world, terrified they should discover he was ill."

"Is he awkward?" I asked in an indifferent voice.

"No. But he asks for the afternoon of the same day in a soft pleading voice as though he knew that only then could he slip off undisturbed. I asked Mrs Marks whether she minded changing; I knew she wouldn't – she has nothing to do but go to the hairdresser."

Miss Maas sees nothing odd in this; the eccentricities of patients are the small change of her day. I see, of course, other reasons for your conduct. Oh yes, Mr van der Valk, I do indeed think that you are concealing things from your superior officers. Whatever the evidence is that you certainly possess, you are sitting on it very quietly.

For some reason of your own, and to do you justice I think it is more than a pretence of playing at cat and mouse, you are moving with extreme caution around me. Is it that you really have nothing sound to go on at all? Or is it, which I think more likely, that you have too much, and cannot dislodge me without stirring up a scandal that would cause heads to roll, involving as it would altogether too many important personages? One of my fortifications is the number of well-known patients I treat discreetly – as I do you. I have a member of the government who gets headaches. He is quite as wary and quite as surreptitious as you are about appointments, which he makes himself; not even his secretary is allowed to know that he consults me.

Or Mrs Marks… She is the soul of virtue, wife of the owner of a firm that is a household word. If there were, later, talk about my female patients, woe to him that began it. I am quite sure that you cannot arrest me.

Yet you press upon my weak spots. When you came today, and I had these last twenty pages still fresh in my mind, I thought that you knew, already, more than is good for you. You sat as has become your habit on the sofa, took out a cigarette and fiddled with it,

sniffed happily at the flowers, looked at me with the expression women's magazines would call 'quizzical'. I looked quizzical right back. I looked at the flowers too. I am fond of flowers, but not the carnations and lilies and orchids of the plate-glass palaces, which I rather hate. The shop-girls pick them out to fill our standing order twice a week. I prefer field flowers, those my father painted. They do not last if cut, but growing they remind me of the road-verges of France, and not of the rarefied glass prisons where Dutch flowers are reared. Of Suzanne, and not of Beatrix.

I did not fiddle with my cigarette; I put it in my mouth and lit it, with a crocodile-and-gold lighter, a present from Beatrix, bought - yes – in the Rue Saint Honoré in Paris. She goes frequently to Paris, where she studies New Looks, New Waves, and New Nonsense. You were plainly leaving me to move the first pawn today.

"My poor van der Valk – aren't you getting a little owlish?"

"How so?" with your grin; you enjoy remarks like this.

"Surely you have realised by now that whatever extraordinary imaginary misdeeds you have lodged in your head, you cannot possibly prove anything at all."

"That isn't what worries me," you said quite seriously.

"No? Then I fail to see what does worry you. I feel a duty towards you, since you are inscribed on a folder as my patient."

"Worries me," you repeated thoughtfully, struck by the word. "Now why do I say worries? – I'm worrying about that. Yes – you. You worry me."

"I do? Tell me then; I'm interested in this symptom."

"That's good, that's very good – that you should be interested. I was afraid you'd continue to pretend boredom."

"Stop acting."

You advanced suddenly at the double, your bayonet fixed.

"I find you spend too much time in your tower above here. I find you too apart, from everything. What contact have you after all with the world? You read papers, you will tell me, books, periodicals. You keep up with medicine. You see plenty of people. And between you and all these things I find a barrier. You're too far away altogether; reaching you isn't going to be easy." You shook your head sadly and made a casual dab at the ashtray, exactly as though you had said 'I wish it would rain; all this dryness does the crops no good'.

I was irritated, naturally. I had to check this irritation.

"My poor fellow – you have seen me here three times, and you have, I suppose, ferreted out any information in the public domain. I suppose you have questioned my friends. And you have the

impudence to come here and talk like this?"

"Oh no, I don't question your friends – they'd all be curious immediately; it would be most unwise. No no, just the public domain. I've seen you of course more than three times. You show too little interest in me, even. Shall I give you an example?"

"Do."

"You go every week to the athletic club. Tuesday evenings unless there's a concert you particularly wish not to miss. You take this exercise seriously – you never have evening appointments" – smiling in an irritating fashion at the evening appointments – "on Tuesdays. You play squash, at which you're quite an adept. With two or three friends, doctors like you. The little weekly health cure."

"No mystery or secret about that – come to the point."

"Why, it is just a coincidence that I go there too, and even play squash sometimes. I haven't followed you; I've gone there for years. Yet you have no notion of that. Your eyes are shut. Last week I practically trod on your feet and you never gave me a glance. You have a wish – which I feel is a bad wish – to obliterate the world, dismiss it from your presence."

I had no immediate answer. I was, indeed, taken aback. It is true that squash on Tuesdays is an old habit of mine, and it is true of course that I know few people there. There are separate groups though; the fencers, for instance, to whom the club really belongs. I did not offer excuses, which would have sounded feeble.

"I can't say that my not noticing you at a place where I go for exercise rather than conversation is much of an indictment."

"Who said anything about an indictment? A straw. Take another straw if you like. The day you were kind enough to show me your tower, where you are so delightfully away from the sweaty mob, like me, I glanced at your bedside books. What do I find? Fantasies. Totally imaginary worlds."

I will admit that you do not leer as though you think yourself clever. But these were half-truths, difficult to admit, pointless to deny. Of course I am fond of those books (an amazing mythological romance by some talented Englishman, a professor of philology or some such science, for he has a great sense of words). They are splendid bedside reading. There is no earthly reason to be ashamed of them, and, of course, to say that liking such books shows a desire to escape from reality is utterly groundless and absurd, the very worst kind of amateur pretend-psychiatry. I said as much tartly. And you laughed heartily.

"The observation," you said with odious amusement, "was a trial

balloon, sent up to see if you would shoot at it. Of course your liking for a book, and I don't care if it's *Justine* or *Alice in Wonderland,* is not in the least an ominous fact. But that you should rush so warmly to your own defence over it shows me that you are aware that there is truth in what I say. The straws are connected with a lot of others which I don't see. I'll give you a very cunning analogy that has just occurred to me. If you wish to give a quick elementary test to my nervous system you tap me on the knee to see if I jerk. That's exactly what I've just done. Tapped you on the knee. It jerked. Shall we try another?" You were full of a kind of childish enjoyment that I have noticed is a favourite pose of yours – I refrain from drawing superficial conclusions about your character.

"Your analogy is false, and your pretended knowledge of an inexact science is zero," I said crossly. "A dabble of jargon that lays bare your superficial mind."

"Very, very good. Shall we try something else? Your foot? – what's the jargon word now for tickling someone's foot and seeing if the toes curl? Mine curl like a bloody octopus at the bare thought."

I had to smile too.

"A simple reaction test," I said gravely, "known to the ignorant, like you, as the Babinski reflex after a French neurologist of more distinction than myself."

"Babinski – isn't that perfect? – can't go wrong with a name like that. Well now – I'm perfectly serious – I invite you for a little game of squash. Not Tuesday – how about Thursday? You'll beat me easily. Do your toes curl?"

It was, I think, your irritating smile that provoked me. You were watching me, I saw, closely, for signs of hesitation or irritation.

"Why not?" I said agreeably. "And now I will ask you to excuse me; I see by my little light that I have a patient waiting."

Eighteen

I have thought, quite a good deal, about you since that last scrap of conversation. I am thinking, to be exact, about a science as inexact, to be sure, and as distorted by popular prejudice in the public mind, as psychiatry. You are not a pretentious person, and you would disclaim, I think, any scientific basis in criminology. There are theories, I gather, which are probably taught to aspirant policemen at the training school. I suspect that you would agree that these are as outdated as the measuring of bumps on men's heads.

As a neurologist I have a slight prejudice against psychiatry, because of the popular confusion. People are constantly coming to me and asking gravely whether psycho-analysis would help them. I notice that the courts, in criminal cases, tend to rely more and more upon psychiatric opinions. I myself would not care to be the consultant expected to give a serious opinion upon an old woman who has poisoned both her husbands with weed-killer at twenty years' interval – I take this as an example since there have lately been two or three remarkably similar examples of this reported in the press. Parathion has become a bogy-man: there is now no man, woman or child in Holland that does not know how to buy it, how to administer it, and that the Minister is 'studying' ways of restricting the open unimpeded sale of this disagreeable chemical. One does not need to be a psychiatrist to know that there will be several more cases.

I do not believe that any serious psychiatric practitioner will really have the insolent vanity to pretend that he can reach into these old women, and say with certainty, 'This is the monster that the prosecutor claims, and it is your duty, gentlemen, to apply rigorous methods.' Equally, he would be very rash to say, 'Give her to me in the clinic for a year, and I will restore you a balanced and useful member of society. He knows that both answers are nonsense. He cannot do that old woman the faintest good.

Even the physiological aspects of human pain and misery are dreadfully obscure. I am a skilful and sensitive diagnostician, but I am singularly helpless in an alarming number of instances. There are men, certainly, who have trained themselves by rigorous disciplines to a sensitivity even greater than that of the complex and delicate machinery we rely upon. An example made familiar by the publicity he was forced to yield to is that of Felix Kersten. But Kersten himself, able to reach and relieve the stomach-aches of Heinrich Himmler, could not put an end to them.

You, van der Valk, will agree with me that in a given set of circumstances any man will commit a crime. Because of a disturbed nervous system. When fears and anxieties begin to press upon a man, an endless series of permutations produces a criminal. The causes of this nervous stress…my poor friend. Snobbery, for instance, and the spirit of competition. The fear of age that is the result of our newly learned exaggerated deference towards youth. What are the effects – the physiological effects – of the human conscience, that abominable invention – upon the human body? You will certainly tell me that for every man I show you who is ill you could show me a criminal.

Are we all criminals? Has every exaggerated-seeming manifestation of the human spirit a nervous origin? Was Jeanne d'Arc simply a witch? Are all saints neurotics, deranged, dangerous persons because their neurosis has become disabling, psychotic? Was the Protestant religion, for example, caused by nothing more than Martin Luther's chronic constipation or John Calvin's earaches? You see at once that the theory is ridiculous. We cannot over-simplify. There is much more to it than a physiological explanation.

I do not use the word religion in its narrow, sectarian sense. In all the doings and thoughts of humanity there is a moral problem. All drama moves upon a moral pivot – a truism. This moral sense – if infected, will a criminal inevitably appear? What is a criminal?

You are, my dear van der Valk, let us suppose in deference to your often-indulged fantasy, a neurologist. To be concrete, you are Felix Kersten, called upon to treat Heinrich Himmler for excruciating and disabling pains – the famous SS stomach-ache. You observe this patient at length, over a period of years. You find a moral person. Himmler had antique military virtues that have become, in our society, derisory. Loyal, honest, incorruptible, patriotic. Poor in money despite his position. Generous, kind to the poor, devoted to the family. His ideals were simplicity, self-sacrifice, integrity. Nobody denies all this.

Should not the whole world have respected such a man? He himself could never understand that there could exist people who would not respect him.

The conventional and the stupid have defined Himmler as a monstrous criminal. Other, learned gentlemen have said he was nothing of the sort, but that he was a little schoolmaster, dotty in the way many people are dotty who would not harm a fly, but who hold strange theories about the Lost Tribes of Israel.

You know, you, Kersten, the neurologist, that the stomach-ache is caused by forcing the little schoolmaster to do monstrous things. But

they are not, to him, monstrous… You see, the exact nature of illness, and of crime, eludes you.

Kersten was a very skilful, very sensitive, wonderfully equipped doctor, to whom I am an ignorant journeyman.

Am I ill? Am I a criminal? I wish you knew. You do not know, because if you knew you would arrest me. This business of evidence is unimportant, really, isn't it?

Has it something to do with God? What God? That lunatic old Stalinist despot? The gentle lamb with the woolly beard and the bleeding heart in the middle of the spotless white soutane? The God of Islam, of the desert, of the romantic Garden of Allah, with its oil-borings surrounded by jeeps, guarded by paratroops, and with fresh asparagus flown in each week by Air France?

Whose God? Who does God belong to, in Holland? An anecdote… The other day I was accosted by one of these girls in the street with evangelist tracts. It is disgraceful to be rude to someone with the courage to stand in the street and voice unpopular or ridiculous opinions. I did not stop her buttonholing me, but I have no use for tracts.

"It is in aid of one or another sect, isn't it? There are too many, you know."

She agreed at once, surprising me. A grave girl, quite young, not pretty but with fine eyes. "I'm afraid," she said, "that is quite true. There are a hundred and eighteen in this country alone."

Did you know that, van der Valk? Quite likely you do; you are a perfect dustbin of unlikely pieces of knowledge.

I belong to no sects, of course. What infuriated me was that the girl was a great deal less perturbed about it than I would be. Did that elusive God invent crime? I bring no peace, he said; I bring a sword.

Nineteen

I read over what I wrote the other night. About my childhood. No psychiatrist, except a fool, hidebound by ridiculous rules – which all vary according to the school he went to – would pretend to find the sources there of my adult character, my beliefs and decisions, my characteristic behaviour. Even if he knew more, even if I told him about my adult life. There would be too many over-simplifications.

I do not believe any doctor capable of penetrating the human being. Imagine a perfect doctor, possessing the arts of the psychiatrist, the science of the physiologist, the skill of the neurologist, the experience of mankind and his liver that the old-fashioned general practitioner has. Imagine him well read in the knowledge of the Chinese, the Arabs, the Persians. Give him all the latest equipment developed by research teams in Berkeley, California – bless their cotton socks.

Idiotic, is it not?

Very well, create a team of doctors uniting all these branches of knowledge. You would get a fine farce; they would be quarrelling violently inside thirty seconds.

Vanity…

Do you remember that at the beginning of this manuscript I jokingly mentioned Monsieur Simenon? He would do as well as any. We cannot bother him, alas; he is busy walking up and down his garden, five kilometres a day. A peripatetic philosopher. You will have to do. I would write to him, but I fear he has secretaries, and is pestered by lunatics, beggars, and aspirant authors.

Am I a criminal, Monsieur Simenon?

I am not an interesting person. Neurologically I belong to the common, fairly dull category of the overtense – 'les grands nerveux'. I need a quiet life, regular hours, plenty of food and sleep. I am at my best in the mornings. My reactions are poor. I have never dared drive a motor regularly. My muscles are weak, my digestion uncertain. Against this I am capable of considerable nervous energy and have a good analytical mind. High intelligence and cramped muscles. I have a need for fresh air and exercise, and plenty of massage. Something like Monsieur Voltaire – or should we say Herr Himmler? I have few mental weaknesses; I am neither lazy, envious nor gluttonous. I have learned patience and detachment. I am resilient, agile and receptive.

My body gives me little trouble, but I understand it. My internal organs are all present and in good condition. My eyes, ears and teeth are all sound and sharp. I keep in adequate condition with a game of

squash and a Finnish sauna each week. I take a winter-sports holiday each year, and a little villa on the coast of Portugal for a month every summer.

You will be puzzled about my wife. Perhaps you are right and this is the great failure of my life. The catastrophe, possibly, that cracked the criminal open. Beware, my friend, of worldly ambition. You know all this already? How deeply have you observed me?

A thought strikes me. I give every person that consults me a thorough physical examination. Never would I risk a diagnosis, even of acne (I get several patients with acne), without it. But you have to diagnose without this aid. You must make up the deficiency by observation. I wonder how good you are at this. It is because I am, I know, good at it that I am going to conduct this experiment. It will be salutary for you to read. I am going to see what it is that I know about you – purely from observation.

That is all talk, nonsense, pretence. The truth is simply that I wish I knew you better.

I must rely upon memory. But my memory, both visual and aural, is excellent.

You are not as tall as I am, but I am one eighty-five. You are a lot broader, but you will get tubby, my friend, unless you take a good deal more exercise than I need. You weigh, I should guess, a hundred and eighty. I approve of your hands, which are strong, broad and, I am glad to say, clean. I am more suspicious of your shirts: do you prefer dark plain cotton shirts for themselves or because they show the dirt less? You are not dressy; your suits are cheap, but they look well on you. You do not, I am glad to say, wear sports jackets or blazers. Simple and suitable; it is a good point. Your shoes, though, are expensive; plain soft leather. Second good point.

Your face is a little too much that of an intelligent ape. It is harsh and bony, which makes it tolerable. Your jaw is too heavy, your teeth too big, your mouth too wide, with enormous furrows alongside it. Your nose is good. Your eyes are too small and too pale. You are good and broad between the ears and your hair is nearly as short as mine – no love-locks. If your forehead were less low and your jaw less prominent, and you had not that comedian's rubbery mouth, you might be quite tolerable-looking.

When talking you have a pleasant habit of taking your coat off and rolling up your sleeves; it is unselfconscious, has nothing to do with the warmth, and amuses me. Your wedding ring is narrow, and you are a Jansenist, I notice. You have a Seamaster watch – a present from your wife, no doubt; it is just the kind of watch one gets as a

reward for being ten years married.

You rummage a great deal in your pockets, which are always full of rubbish. I have noticed a workmanlike pocket-knife, your packet of cigarettes that is always squashed (I agree that cigarette cases are detestable things) a kleptomaniac liking for rubber bands, paperclips and pieces of string. You are no truster of ballpoint pens, since you have always at least three, yet go on – trustingly – buying cheap ones. You keep your money in a purse – pleasantly old-fashioned of you. You come, obviously, of a poor family and were trained as a child to be careful and waste nothing.

You are, I hazard the guess with confidence, largely self-educated. You have been to no superior school, no university. Do you rather resent people with that polytechnic gloss upon them? Yet you have a huge respect for it. If you were French you would take your hat off in the Rue d'Ulm.

What you do have is considerable intellectual curiosity. You have read smatterings of poetry and philosophy. You know nothing about music but you are fairly well read. You speak French and German, a thing I envy, since I read both but cannot speak them. You have been – but that you told me yourself – in the army in England.

You are very Dutch. You have a characteristic crudeness, brutality. Your tendency towards lavatory humour is deplorable. You have Dutch virtues: stability, perseverance, obstinacy. You have also too much imagination altogether – less common, here – and you are absurdly individualist. You certainly behave towards me as no policeman under orders would; that, my friend, is your own, your personal idea.

You have a certain sympathy for me, which you take – good for you – little pains to conceal. You are a bit of a sensualist yourself; you like eating and drinking, don't you? And girls, and perfume, and southern baroque art, and Mediterranean landscapes. You have a strong vulgar streak, and are not ashamed about it.

Damn you. Anybody else would never have penetrated my fortifications. I could have complained about you; you would not have cared.

I want you to know that I deliberately did not complain of you, and that I am not afraid of you. I wish to show you that I am in some sense worthy of you, that I do not lack all humour, that when you pin me I shall not resent you. I rather like you, and I rarely like people. Did I say it earlier? – we could under other circumstances have been friends.

I am wrong. It is just these circumstances that make us friends.

You have overcome your ingrained Dutch respect for my position. You do not think of me as a doctor. When you lay hands upon me, will it be the doctor or the person? I find it difficult to see you as the policeman, with nothing better to do in life than clapping malefactors into handcuffs.

I am envious of you. Of your combativeness, of your courage. The unorthodoxy that is your dominant trait interests me the more because of your position and function in our rigid social order. Here, where orthodoxy is expected and exacted, you have outflanked me. That takes courage. You belong to the hierarchy, and any shaky pillar in that hierarchy has small chance of survival. How do you defend the reputation for eccentricity you certainly possess?

My envy is the keener because I can speak with authority. I belong to the structure I talk of. I am expected to be a pillar of society. It is exacted from me to behave as a doctor is expected to behave: that is an inelegant phrase, which will worry neither of us.

Of course, if we show combativeness we are not punished, as you are doubtless punished, by a reprimand, the famous and classic Dutch 'berisping'. We are punished by a barely noticeable coolness. This drop in the temperature is accompanied by a drop in the income, for by a mysterious grapevine the patients are aware of the situation. He may be good at curing your ailments, but he is not quite one of us; you might do better to avoid… Once upon this slippery slope he had better begin to mend his ways, or he will find himself, unless he gets quickly and unobtrusively back into line, in much the same circumstances as a prominent man, let us say, in the state of Georgia, to whom had been attached the little label 'nigger-lover'.

I think I know why you survive, why you have an advantage that I have not. I think that you possess not simply combativeness, but talent. Talent, considerable talent, can secure one from persecution. I can think of half a dozen people perhaps, who, possessing this talent, have secured their freedom. Even a minister.

Have you understood why I have dwelt at length on this subject, why I am so fascinated by this spectacle? Quite right, my friend. It is because I myself fail. I do not belong to your club, the club of those who have talent, who do not care. I do not have enough talent. I am not good enough.

Naturally, I do not fall into the obvious error of self-pity, nor that of underestimating my capacities. Nor do I wish you to think that I throw all the blame upon my wife. It is true that I have thought that things might have turned out very differently had I married another woman, but that is not Beatrix's fault. I chose her. I married her

deliberately, in cold blood, for the affluence, for the position, for the introduction she could give me into what I thought of as ‘the club’. Le tout-Paris. I had not understood then that there is only one club.

And I am a good doctor. But I have never broken through the barrier that separates the people with skill from the winner. I am a born second-rater, a born lightweight. Perhaps you have not yet found this out.

But you will.

Twenty

I am discouraged. You eluded me. I thought that we had reached a point…that we were going to make real contact at last. You delighted me, and then you eluded me.

I went to the athletic club, but with the feeling that I was making a mistake, that I should be bored, even that I might make a fool of myself. What have I to do with you, after all? You are, at the end of the reckoning, a three-ha'penny policeman that thinks himself clever. You are no cleverer than I am, perhaps less so. You do not penetrate me except in so far as I allow you to, amusedly, to let you see what you miss, how wide you are and remain of the mark. I have tempted you to think yourself more clever than you are. But you are a clown, Inspector Thing, and a clown does not entrap a person like myself. You know that you cannot proceed against me, and you propose, impudently, that I should yield to you…

It was an odd sensation, arriving in a place you are familiar with, and finding it so unfamiliar. I had not realised that the Thursday clientèle would be so different from that of Tuesday. I suppose there are sporting fanatics that haunt the place, but such are not interesting to me. I felt lost, and wandered about wondering whether you had already arrived. I was recognised by no one but the woman behind the bar who makes coffee, and all she said was, 'Why, hallo, Doctor, lost your calendar?', which annoyed me.

I found you gossiping with a man I neither know nor wish to know; he looks a clot. You told me he was regarded as a serious contender in the lightweights, or the featherweights, or the clotweights, for a European Judo Championship – as though I cared. You were learning, you said, about judo in case you got the sack from the police and had to take a job as a taxi-driver; this for my benefit. Your clotweight pal, who had the type of very curly close strawy hair that sets my teeth on edge, thought this a good joke and clapped you on the back. If people clap me on the back I simply do not speak to them again, but a policeman, I suppose, cannot afford such gestures. The man looked to me the sort of bank clerk that absconds with funds, but perhaps that is why you cultivate his acquaintance.

You had to gossip some more with another pal, a fat girl with rat's-tail hair and a moronic look – some swimmer. After keeping me waiting a good twenty minutes you said 'Well, let's go and play squash', and I was so irritated that it took me several minutes to regain my control.

I changed; there are only a few clothes-lockers in this place, and I

have one, though I take my playing clothes home each time after use. Clothes that have been sweated in, after hanging a day in a closed locker, smell most unpleasant: it is a pity other people do not recognise this fact. The squash court, though the fencers use it as well, is the only place on these premises that does not smell of feet.

I changed, into cotton trousers and a track-suit top. You sprawled on a bench with your hands in the pockets of denim shorts: you had simply taken off your trousers and dumped them. It irritates me to have someone watch me change, but it was a good exercise in the kind of watchful calm I have to maintain with you.

I do not wear shorts except when swimming; I have the kind of stringy leg that does not look well in shorts. You, I noticed, had exactly the kind of loose muscular leg, rather too hairy, that does look at its best in precisely the brief shorts you wore. You see that I have acquired a habit – your habit – of observation.

To make conversation, for a stony silence had fallen and I am not talkative in my underpants in public, I said something trivial. Your white sweater – rather off-white if I may say so, and you might ask your wife to wash it – was ordinary, but I needed something ordinary to restore my even quietness.

"Nice sweater that."

You beamed with your childish enjoyment.

"Isn't it? Standard Navy issue to submarine crews; cost me ten bob twenty years ago, in a government surplus store in Gosport."

Typical.

I took my racket out of its press; yours wasn't in a press.

"I have any number of balls."

"Delighted to hear it; I haven't any; my children pinch them."

We walked on to the court. I am a fair squash player, having a sensitive touch. If I play a ball into an angle I generally get the return angle I want. I stand still as much as I can because I can't chase balls. I saw that I could beat you straight off on skill alone, but you gave me a harder match than I had thought. Once you took your sweater off – you had an ordinary cotton street shirt on – you started chasing everything. Hitting far too hard at impossible balls, talking, laughing, catcalling, jumping up and down when, as you quite often did, you brought off a good return with a shot that cannoned all over the court and left me flat-footed. You ran like a wild man, crashed into walls, sent half your services out of court, played one or two cunning flick shots I had not thought you capable of, and at least three superb balls that nobody could have returned, even though next time, invariably, you missed the ball altogether and looked accusingly at

your racket to see where the hole was. As for my play it was like myself: clever, controlled, occasionally extremely skilful.

I find myself, probably momentarily, certainly temporarily, a thought depressed. I am tired. I find you like the Old Man of the Sea. I need a break from my routine. I have thought that this would be a mistake in tactics, as it might lead you to imagine that the strain was telling on me, but I do not care what you think. Thinking things will not help you find legal or convincing proof against me.

I have been tempted, at times of fatigue, like this, to slash the whole knot apart conclusively. I could always disappear. You have, no doubt, eyes upon me. You could arrange, possibly, to be notified if I made any unusual withdrawals from the bank. No, that, I rather think, is an official act needing official sanction, and I have never believed that you had any official sanction. Yes, it is a temptation to think of the pleasant life I could construct in South America.

Come come: that sounds too like some deplorable doctor who has made revolting experiments in concentration camps. I must not become childish. I have all the weaknesses of a member of the 'establishment' and all the strengths. No police officer will dare institute proceedings against me. You would be bedevilled by a perfect tidal wave of outrage. Wrongful arrest, slander, damage to professional standing, abusive and excessive use of judicial powers. I have only to lift a finger, ring my minister, say that I am being blackmailed by a police officer.

My position is extremely strong, for as long as I choose to keep it so. I feel better; I always pick up rapidly. I will go off for a week, and you cannot do a damn thing about it. Not the sea, I think; the season is still too summery and there are tourists everywhere. Perhaps the forests. Autumn is getting near and there will soon be mushrooms. I am tempted by the notion of trees, huge numbers of trees, and I could pick a few amanitas for you, as a present.

That game of squash was typical of Post, thought van der Valk, taking off his shorts and stuffing them in his briefcase, next to the grey cardboard file marked CMP. He beat me, of course, being a practised, clever player. Yet if I took this damn game seriously I could beat him. By chasing everything, pushing him, playing him off balance, pressing in on him – if I practised… Sure, he is a tricky player, but when the ball flies out of his reach he lets it go. He stands aloofly watching it go, with his little smile, and gives his opponent that faint nod of amused congratulation, as though one were a peasant beneath his notice. As though there were something contemptible about running, fighting, competing. There's no fight in him.

It was at that moment that he decided to lash out for all he was worth.

He waited for the doctor in the bar.

"How about a drink? Not here; too many people. Why not in the Amstel? That's more your style anyway. Quiet, discreet, elegant, beautiful view over the water at evening. Twilight on the bridge - Whistler nocturne – that's what we like about the Amstel, that nostalgic feeling. No police riffraff there, either." The Amstel Hotel, which is the best in Holland, was a couple of hundred metres away, along the Sarphatistraat.

"Very well," said Post agreeably. "It might be pleasant. I quite enjoy your company. You make, too, an interesting study – do you know you're quite a casebook example?"

Van der Valk beamed at him. "Still waiting for me to get tired, and go home and leave you in peace?"

"That is your choice. Your time you waste. It is indifferent to me – have I not told you about the man who used to get a recurrent desire to kill me?"

"Here we are. We might meet Mr Merckel; great stamping-ground this for your patients. Official dinners, with miniature decorations, under the gracious patronage of royalty. Preserving wild life, or some such praiseworthy cause."

They sat down by the window that overlooks the terrace and looked out at the Amstel river.

"I buy the drinks, since I lost the game. Two very good very large cognacs."

"Certainly, sir. Any especial brand?"

"Whatever you please. And two Cuban cigars."

"Police hospitality!" said Post. "I'm quite struck. Rather significant, I fear: compensation wishes in you. Why not two beers and a packet of Caballeros?"

"You're a very special customer of mine. I like to see them happy, too. Look at him warming the glasses – he gets bored, you know. Like me. I have sympathy for all waiters; I'm sort of a one myself."

"Speaking for myself, I'm never bored."

"You aren't? Here's to you. I got this for you really because you need it."

"What, after a game of squash? A glass of squash, more likely."

"This is different. Now we're in a championship match. You want to absorb a lot of courage. You know who wins championship matches? The one who survives setbacks the longest. If that game

had been for a championship, I'd have beaten you easily, wouldn't I? You follow?"

Post said nothing. Van der Valk picked up the enormous glass, stood it on his nose, and licked his lips happily.

"I must be off; my wife will be wondering where I've got to. Think I'll take a little stroll though, back along the river as far as the Rembrandtplein. Smoke this as I go. They taste best along the waterside."

"Good night."

"My pleasure. Ring me up some time…when you've had enough of it. Don't get like Casimir – you start collecting younger and younger girls…no future in it. You'd really like to be free of that house too, wouldn't you? You can, you know. So long."

Rather wearily, Post caught the waiter's eye and ordered another brandy. He wished heartily he were back in his studio, lying in his silk dressing-gown on the cheap divan, with a book, Jane Austen - he was getting quite to enjoy Jane Austen…

It was with some glee that van der Valk heard about Dr van der Post's little holiday in the Schwarzwald. That was a good sign – nothing like a good German introspective forest landscape to bring out one's melancholy poetic nature, what? One renounced women for the little volume of Rilke bound in limp leather, ha. Or of course one took one's rifle and went deer-hunting. Even better! Post in the role of hunter would be fine: he would spend a good deal of time sympathising with the deer. What thoughts would pass through his mind at the moment when, after a long crawl through sodden bracken, he finally got downwind of an unsuspecting beast, found a sightline, saw the cross-hairs on his backsight wavering across that rough warm sympathetic flank, loosened all his muscles, breathing shallowly through the mouth, and waited for the rifle-barrel to steady on the sturdy muscled shoulder? Would he really be able to feel the skin tighten and whiten on the top knuckle of the right hand?

Whatever the fellow did, he, van der Valk, busy deer-hunting in a smelly little office in the Marnixstraat, would be thinking up some new medicine to tighten the screw still more. He had at the moment no very good idea how, but he would find one, oh yes.

Unfortunately he got drowned all of a sudden in one of the incomprehensible busy periods of a policeman's life. Instead of pleasant summery evenings observing the demeanour of the art whore he was getting home at eleven at night, dulled and silent, to be given cocoa and rolled towards his bed by a wife he did not see at

all during the day and hardly saw now when she dragged his socks off and pulled his shirt out of his belt to tap his back-muscles loose. Not for the first time, he was forced to forget all about Dr van der Post. There were other pots that might come to the boil if he stoked hard enough.

It was Chief Inspector Kan, all the same, that finally got Cross-eyed Janus, who made the grievous mistake of getting over-ambitious. If he had stuck to second-hand cars they would never have reached him, but Janus was tired of being a garage-attendant. He wanted to be a gentleman – damn it, there were criminals a lot worse than he to whom the Public Prosecutor took his hat off when he saw them on the street. He made an unwary phone-call. When Kan called, prim and tidy, Janus, who had always thought Kan a good subject for a horse-laugh, was disconcerted. Worse, he lost his head. He offered Kan a big bribe – they were all quite startled how big, and if it had been anybody but Kan they would have suspected him of exaggerating. Poor old Janus – all that money, and his looks against him, and the fearful Amsterdam accent, and those Charing Cross Road clothes. He should never have got friendly with Rouppe, who looked like a gentleman and even behaved like one, so that Janus had never imagined he might be a police informer…

They had him. Issuing of false written statements (a great Dutch catch-all), incomplete and falsified income-tax returns, receiving of goods known to be stolen, harbouring of same, attempted disposal of same, interfering with an officer in the execution of his duty, attempted corruption of a state functionary – the Officer of Justice (red round a receding hairline after a delightful holiday in the Aegean) made a little addition of penalties, arrived at a fantastic total, and rather regretfully concluded that a lot of these sentences would have to Run Concurrently.

The police department was jubilant. They were being jubilant when the telephone rang.

“For you, van der Valk.”

“Gentleman asking to speak to you” – the concierge at the switchboard.

“Well we’re all gentlemen today,” handsomely. “Put him on. Gentleman have a name?”

“A Dr Post.”

Van der Valk had a tiny shock of self-blame at having forgotten, and gave himself a rap on the knuckle of his trigger finger. His deer was within range, and he had been busy badger-watching.

“Van der Valk. Good morning to you. No, this is a private line. Yes,

I'm alone in the office." The others were gawking, but they held their tongues.

"Would you care to come and see me in my consulting-room, when you can spare the time?" Post's quiet voice sounded remote and cool, as unemotional as ever. "Are you still there?"

"Certainly I'm still there. I was thinking. I'd be inclined to make another suggestion. Suppose you came to see me here?"

"There? In that headquarters building or whatever you call it?" Post sounded a scrap shocked at this invasion of privacy.

"I believe – I base this on the experience of a good many people – you'd find this a great deal easier in my office than in yours. We'd be perfectly private, and undisturbed. Simply ask at the desk for Commissaris Samson's office. I'll see that the concierge does not keep you waiting."

There was another pause, at Post's end this time.

"Why do you suggest this?" he asked at last. The answer, thought van der Valk, would be important.

"That terrible house," he said. "Wait a minute, I'm looking for the right way to express myself." Van der Valk's eye glanced round the room. Mr Kan was already making notes on the margin of a report. Mr Samson was sitting – or rather standing with his backside propped against a table, his hands in his pockets, watching. He had a faint grin, as though curious to see how van der Valk would handle this.

"Perhaps the best way of putting it is to say that once here, you can shed, completely, an identity that has grown distasteful. The gestures we go through here are almost totally automatic and impersonal. We no longer have any hostility, you see. If anything, it's rather a friendly performance."

The pause this time was slighter.

"Are you free at this minute? I mean, to be more precise, in about twenty minutes?"

"Free as the wind."

"Very well," suddenly. "You can expect me."

Van der Valk put the phone down and said "Oof".

"Post, if I'm not much mistaken," said the old gentleman.

"Quite right. In a quarter of an hour. I'd like to make it easy for him."

Mr Samson had understood.

"Very well. In my office then. You can be stenographer. So – he's realised at last that he's without a friend in the world?"

"He's realised, I think," said van der Valk soberly, "that I'm the

only one he’s got.”

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